

***BEFOREPLAY: FAMILY STORIES, TEEN AND ADULT PARENTS
AND SEXUAL HEALTH COMMUNICATION***

by

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Abstract

In previous research, teens and parents continually report difficulties sharing what they know about sexuality with members of their families. This can lead to distressing emotional, social and physical consequences ranging from risky sexual behaviours to disconnections within the family. The importance of preserving family connections while sharing expertise around sexual behaviour led to the question- what are families' stories of sexuality and how do these stories matter to sexual health and relationships? Through the qualitative method of narrative inquiry guided by social construction and critical social theories, this research study explored, through the narrative methods of storytelling and drawing, the interplay between family connections, knowledge about sexuality, and communication exchanges about sexual behaviour. This work offers insights into the uniquely-situated and diverse pathways of sexual health and family communication, supporting ongoing development of health promotion programs that are oriented toward the needs of individuals and community. Discussion includes how family drawings created by participants, concept mapping, and ghostwritten stories formed the analysis, and how these outcomes may influence sexual health education and counseling.

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Chapter One- Introduction

Young people learn about sexual health through a number of different avenues, including school, service professionals, friends, and the media (Epstein, 2008; Soon, 2009). In previous research, youth continually report their desire to learn about sexual health from a parent (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Soon, 2009). Furthermore, parents often assert that they feel sexuality is strongly linked to cultural and family values, and therefore should be taught in the home (McKay, 1996; Sex Information and Education Council of Canada [SIECCAN], 2004). There are a number of well-intentioned programs designed to support inter-familial communication about sexuality (e.g., Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada [SOGC], 2009), however youth continue to report their parents' hesitancy to talk about sexuality, increasing the likelihood that sexual health information will come from a less-reliable source (Epstein, 2008; Soon, 2009). This may result in less-informed sexual decision-making on the part of the youth, and a greater likelihood of youth exposure to risk such as unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection (STI).

There are many social realities that can influence the ability of families to openly discuss sexual health in the home. Parents may have an expectation that youth are not sexually active (McKay, Pietrusiak, & Holowaty, 1998), that youth learn about sexual health in school (SIECCAN, 2004), or that sexual health actually has been appropriately addressed in the home (McKay et al., 1998). Youth feel embarrassment and shame, and report fears that parents will be disappointed or less trusting if youth are honest about their sexual behaviour (Shoveller, Johnson, Langille, & Mitchell, 2004; Soon, 2009). Relationship roles, family structure, and expectations influence the ability of parents and youth to talk with one another openly about sexual health (Stone, 1988; Wyatt & Carlo, 2002).

There is no shortage of academic research that explores sexual health communication in families, some of which will be summarized in Chapter Two. However, missing in the literature is an exploration of the complexity of the parent-child relationship and family identity, and how these crucial components of daily life create norms that dictate what is discussed, how it is discussed, and whether it is *heard*. Also missing is research on whether parents respond to sexual health media, and how this is integrated into family discussions. I believe in the need to explore the experiences of youth and parents in their family context, partly as a response to the numerous statistical reports that suggest that sexually active youth are somehow troubled or that parents have not properly addressed the protection of their child in some ways (e.g., Corcoran, Franklin, & Bennett, 2000). This research explored how discussions of sexuality and relationship health are negotiated within the daily lives of youth and parents.

My personal interest in this topic is in part due to my identity as a counsellor-researcher in the field of sexual health, and my experience working with those managing HIV/AIDS. I hope I have highlighted the individual experiences of those who are often labelled “social problem” (Proweller, 2000, p. 101), “rebellious” (Ehrlich, 2003, p. 10), or the result of family dysfunction (Corcoran, Franklin, & Bennett, 2000). I feel that this study has the potential to challenge stigmatic labels, through the individual voices of the participants.

Motivation, Purpose, and Research Question

In nation-wide studies, 65% of youth report engaging in sexual activity by the age of 19, with one-third of those additionally reporting sex with multiple partners (Rotermann, 2008). These same studies report that the younger a person is when she or he becomes

sexually active, the less likely she or he is to use contraception (Rotermann, 2008). There have been numerous programs designed to positively influence sexual decision-making of youth (e.g., Kirby, 2002), however in the Central Interior of British Columbia, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection rates are among the highest in the province (Table 1) (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2007; BC Vital Statistics, 2006). Family discussion about sexual behaviour may protect youth from the relational, emotional, and financial consequences of unsafe sexual behaviour (Hutchinson, 2002). My interests lie in how discussions about sexual health are achieved between youth and parents, and the conversations that occur in families to influence sexual decision-making.

As exposure to sexual behaviour becomes more normative through public forums such as the internet, research that explores what individuals and families *do* with the growing amount of information and mis-information related to sexual health becomes more relevant. This research begins to address this gap in knowledge by using a narrative approach, exploring the storied complexities of parent-child relationships and discussions about sexual health. The purpose of this study was to explore the reflections of selected teens and parents on their experience of talking about sexuality and relationships in their families. How a family's identity frames how sexual behaviour is discussed, how the conversation is experienced by the parent and youth, and what is done with the shared information has been considered. The research question guiding this study is: What are families' stories of sexuality and how do these stories *matter* to sexual health and relationships? Youth were asked how they imagine their own children will respond to the same conversation when they are in the position of parent. This research explores these variables, as well as addresses the gap in

literature exploring youth and parent stories on information exchanges about sexuality and family identity.

Approach Considerations

Working through conceptual models shaped by both social constructionism and critical social theory, I attempt here to situate the culture and value-laden topics of sexual health and family communication. Social construction is described as an acknowledgement of multiple realities present in a lived experience, and how interactions in our social world create and re-create our realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999). Critical theory adds to the social construction dialogue by also recognizing the relevance of “multivoiced epistemology” (Bishop, 1994, p. 5). The task of the researcher is to expand awareness of community-level stories that do not always find a place in academia (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Freire (1973) describes programs lead by critical theory as those that go beyond “perceptions of reality” (p. 44) to acknowledge, engage, and transform community-level voices. Together, social constructionism and critical social theory have proven appropriate for this project, highlighting the relevance of societal, cultural, and historical expectations on family dynamics and how this might influence sexual health communication.

A qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry was well-suited to the complexities inherent in social and cultural realities surrounding the topic of sexuality and families. Reissman (1993) notes that a narrative approach makes space for “linguistic and cultural resources” (p. 2). Families and family stories are “sculpted by class, by the times, and by ethnicity as well as by the combination of individual personalities that comprise it” (Stone, 1988, p. 18). Exploring the socially and culturally constructed meaning of family

communication and sexual health through stories using narrative inquiry allowed for rich and unique accounts to unfold. Narrative analysis is a flexible qualitative method that allows an interpretive process, shaped by both the researcher and the participants, attempting to avoid statistical categorization and valuing instead the lived experience of participants (Gergen, 1999; Golafshani, 2003; Reissman, 1993). Qualitative analysis for a study using narrative inquiry applies theory in systematic ways to offer explanations for researcher and participant interpretations of meaning (Gergen, 1999; Lather, 1991).

Within qualitative methods, research validity is described in terms of quality or authenticity, which can be gauged in different ways (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln, 1995; Reissman, 1993). Credibility describes whether the research program accurately represents the individuals for which the work is intended (Golafshani, 2003; Trochim, 2006). For this research study, relevance of the topic was initially established from previous research, in which the issues of parent-teen communication about sexual health were identified (e.g., Brock & Jennings, 1993; Soon, 2009). As the research unfolded, credibility was evaluated by reviewing unfolding thematic analyses of narratives with participants (Lather, 1991; Trochim, 2006). Furthermore, I provided opportunities for the participants to direct changes to probes within the interview process. Lather (1991) suggests that a true test of the credibility of a research program is found in the reaction of the participants. By offering participants an opportunity to critique or reject the analysis, the quality of the study is improved. The ability to corroborate the research outcomes with others in the field adds to the analytic confirmability of this qualitative study (Trochim, 2006). In addition to the confirmation of the participants as previously described, I have worked with a community sexual health professional, and reflected with my supervisor and committee members in order to validate

my interpretation of the narratives. I have also actively sought information from other theorists working in both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to further confirm the analysis (Trochim, 2006).

Under the guiding framework of both social constructionism and critical theory I have been able to situate narrative inquiry and analysis and the culture and value-laden topics of sexual health, and family communication. Further exploration of the use of a narrative approach to explore sexual health communication through the lens of social constructionism and critical social theory and ways I have ensured the rigour of the research is offered in Chapter Three.

Definition of Terms

Sexual behaviour. Public Health Canada (2003) defines sexual behaviour as “a central aspect of being human” (p. 5), including physical, biological, and emotional realms, and influenced by social and cultural factors. “Sexuality is best understood as a complex, fluid and dynamic set of forces that are an integral aspect of an individual’s sense of identity, social well-being and personal health” (PHAC, 2003, p.5). As sexual behaviour can encompass a broad range of specific behaviours, I have used the participant’s descriptions of sexual behaviour through the process of this research.

Sexual health. Sexual health is acknowledged as being socially constructed based on community values and norms (PHAC, 2003; SOGC, 2009). Sexual health includes positive outcomes, such as pleasure and intimacy, and negative outcomes such as unintended pregnancy, STIs, and false beliefs (PHAC, 2003; SOGC, 2009). In previous research, sexual health has been described as *protective*, focusing on the prevention of pregnancy or disease

(Byers, Sears, Voyer, Thurlow, Cohen, & Weaver, 2003; Epstein & Ward, 2008; McKay, 1996), *relational* focused on safe relationships (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Byers et al., 2003), and *biological*, focusing on the physiology of sexuality (McKay et al., 1998; Soon, 2009). For the purpose of this study, sexual health has been left open to the participants' definitions, allowing participants to share values that may be informed by cultural practices (PHAC, 2003).

Sexual health education. Given that sexual health as defined above encompasses both positive and negative outcomes of sexual behaviour, sexual health education can be described as providing tools needed to attain sexual health (see PHAC, 2003). Sexual health education is experienced by participants in multiple ways, with participants responding with various methods used to communicate healthy behaviours in their families (Wyatt & Carlo, 2002; see also Stone, 1998).

Youth. The term *youth* is used throughout this thesis as being between the ages of 12 and 20. This age is normally considered the age where youth are exposed to sexual health education and media (SIECCAN, 2004). Youth participants for this study are 19 or 20. This age was chosen due to ethical considerations related to age of consent for research regarding sensitive topics (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2005; see also Tan, Passerini, & Stewart, 2007), and the potential for older youth to have more ability to reflect upon autobiographical memories that comprise narrative (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Youth participants for this study have also experienced pregnancy and are currently parenting their children. The experience of pregnancy can be considered a defining moment in the life of a youth, "particularly vivid, emotional, and familiar...essential for the development of the internalized life story" (Thorne & McLean, 2003, p.169). This may have resulted in a more detailed

reflection on the sexual health education received from the parents. Youth participants with their own children were also positioned to reflect into the future about how they will communicate sexual health to their children, integrating ideas of their own experience of being both youth and parent.

Parent. Parent participants for this study are currently parenting youth between the ages of 12 and 20.

Communication. Finally, what constitutes communication was left open for interpretation by the participants. Communication broadly encompasses planned education, symbolic representations, or perceptions of ideas (Bastien, 2009; Brock & Beazley, 1995; Wyatt & Carlo, 2002). Participants' experiences communicating as they describe them have been acknowledged and explored.

Summary of Chapter One and Overview of Thesis

This program of research is designed to highlight the relevance of sexual health and families in the Central Interior. In this chapter I have presented my theoretical framework and how these ideas have influenced both my approach to the work and my analysis throughout. The following chapters include a critical review of programmes exploring sexuality communication and families, a more expansive description of my theoretical and methodological approach, and finally, the stories of the participants. In the final chapters I explore my analysis of the stories, particularly areas where the topics of sexual health and family communication intersect, resulting in influences on communication and decision-making in relation to the research question. Implications of this research in relation to counselling, health promotion, and future research endeavours are explored, as well as my final comments about the project.

Chapter Two- Literature Review

Sexuality is part of identity, playing an important role in how people behave relationally. When situating emerging sexual identities in a family context, family members may struggle with knowing what to communicate about sexual identity and whether sexuality belongs within the realm of family discussion. Integrating ideas about a sexual self, family relationships and customs of family communication offer potential understandings of how ideas are exchanged and healthy behaviours are communicated between parents and youth.

Chapter Two begins with an exploration of research on sexual identity and the role that relationships play in navigating emerging sexuality. Literature on individual self-concept, relationships with others, and how social institutions influence sexual identity will be explored in relation to sexuality communication. Next, literature describing how parents manage emerging sexual identity within the family context will be examined. The daily acts of parenting and the influence of other family needs provide us with clues of how sexuality communication intersects with the social world. Finally, research on family patterns of communicating will be explored. Types of language that families report using when discussing sexuality, different ways that families spend time together, and how relationship quality provides the foundation for communication is discussed. Some sections include a quote from the participants in this research to highlight the relevance of these topics. This chapter closes with a summary of the research, offering my integration of these ideas in reference to the focus of this research.

Sexual Identity and Relationships

The sexual self is a relational self. Sexual identity develops as a person interacts with others who are also actively engaged in identity development (Diamond, 2006; Holland, Ramazanglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; see also Meyer, 2008; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Prado, 2006). The sexual self is also a result of social scripts provided by customs and institutions where people learn about sex, sexuality, and relationships (Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Teitelman, Bohinski, & Boente, 2009). Researchers suggest that the sexual self is oriented toward *connectedness* with self, others and the world.

“Just to be together, that’s the point of the relationship in the first place...that’s what makes it strong, really.” (Wood, age 20)

Connectedness is described as a responsive, interdependent exchange. This includes conditions of harmony, open-mindedness, affection, and love (Burt, 1997; Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2005; McShane, Hastings, Smylie, & Prince, 2009; Muñoz-Laboy, Leau, Sriram, Weinstein, del Aquila, & Parker, 2009; Richmond, Ross, & Egeland, 2007). Connectedness influences how sexual identity is perceived, and how sexuality communication with others occurs. In this section, I will describe how sexual identity and communication is influenced by a person’s sense of connectedness with self and others. I will also discuss how institutions influence how we come to understand the world and how that relates to sexuality communication.

Self-concept and a ‘respectable’ self. Self-concept is described as an integration of reflections on the potential self and positioning oneself in relation or response to the world (Klaw, 2008; Thorne & McLean, 2003; Ward, 2000). Research on self-concept points to

efforts at positioning the self so as to simultaneously critique the social world while finding a place in it (Bamberg, 1997; Riessman, 2003; Thorne & McLean, 2003).

“My foster mom taught me how to associate with others nicely...how to listen to other people’s feelings. Then I dropped out to school to have a relationship with the people that were living on the street. Their life was exactly what I left when I was a child...rude and obnoxious.” (Vita, age 20)

This includes an internal dialogue where positive aspects of the self are integrated, and disempowering ideas are opposed (Bohanek et al., 2009; Klaw, 2008). Managing physiological developments, negotiating sexual desire, and assimilating these situations may be described as self-defining as they influence self-concept and how sexual identity is perceived (Alfares, Goerisch, Gurthrie, & Rothblum, 2008; Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; McLean & Thorne, 2003).

Researchers propose that sexual desire is something that should be contained for youth in order to preserve a respectable self-concept. One researcher cleverly describes youth sexual desire as “Pandora’s box” (Costa, Noguera, & Lopez, 2009, p. 431). Just as Pandora’s box, when opened, unleashed troubles and sickness that could not be contained (see Neils, 2005), so too is sexual desire portrayed as something that, once released, can never be returned to the original, safe place (Costa et al., 2009; Welles, 2005; Zamboni & Silver, 2009). Research indicates that some families avoid discussion of sexual desire for fear that it will encourage sexual behaviour (Lappin, 1994; Zamboni & Silver, 2009). Women participating in Costa et al’s (2009) study actively suppressed sexual desire, with Jackson & Cram (2003)

adding that sexual desire is regarded negatively in relation to a woman's self-concept, while regarded positively for men.

"[My son] lost his virginity at 13...my daughter, my oldest daughter kept her virginity til she was 19. Very proud of her, very proud of her." (Yovela, mother of four)

In Welles (2005) meta-analysis of literature related to women's self-concept and sexual desire, women were comfortable in articulating their individual desire but responded negatively toward women's collective sexual desire. This representation of desire as being something to suppress or avoid may influence self-concept and emerging sexual identity.

Sexual identity and sexual behaviour is sometimes related to self-respect and shame in research, with youth participants describing their sexuality using ideas of a reputable, decent or moral self (Froyum, 2007; Matyastick, Baier, & Wampler, 2008; Yip, 2004). Describing the self as respectable presumably positions a person against a disrespectable other (Froyum, 2007), designating sexuality as something that only those with little regard for positive self-concept would enjoy. Rosenbaum (2009) adds an interesting perspective on moral positioning with a review of youth that have made virginity pledges. Virginity pledges are verbal or written contracts highlighting a "commitment to a lifetime of purity (LifeWay Christian Resources, 2007). Upon completion of sexual health programs provided by both public and private schools, youth are considered graduates of the program upon agreeing to remain sexually abstinent until in a heterosexual marriage. Some consider this a position of respect and morality. However, Rosenbaum (2009) found that, five years after virginity pledging, youth in her study denied having pledged, and were more likely than non-pledging youth to engage in sexual risk behaviour. In this case, the relationship with the sexual self and the

respectable self created difficulties for these youth in communicating sexual health needs. Navigating the physical desires of sexuality is closely tied in with a person's perception of their respectability, influencing ideas about their self-concept. This could impact how sexual identity is communicated to others, and how a person perceives herself.

Relationships with peers and family. Through observing and reflecting upon others we sometimes make decisions about our own behaviours, including those related to sexual identity (Meyer, 2008; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Programs designed to influence sexual health decisions often focus on this social aspect of self-definition, such as family and the community relationships (Gavin, Catalano, David-Ferdon, Gloppen, & Markham, 2010). Interaction with peers and family can influence internalized ideas about self-concept and the emerging sexual self. By mid-adolescence, peer relationships are reported to be influential in the development of self-concept (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Peer interactions provide a forum for behavioural exchanges and how that relates to self-concept (Gergen et al., 2004). Interacting with peers allows negotiation of gender role positioning in friendships, sexual relationships, and society (MacPherson & Fine, 1995; Sion & Ben-Ari, 2009).

“It is a big scandal out there. I’m one of the least women that are like that, but most of my friends are.” (Vita, age 20)

Peer relationships provide occasions for testing personal desires against the expectations of others, and learning the conditions under which sexuality and communication about sex is acceptable (Jewkes, Morrell, & Christofides, 2009; Lefkowitz & Espinosa-

Hernandez, 2007; see also Plunkett, 2001). Overall, peers offer youth an opportunity to develop individual self-concept in a community with other age-mates.

Developing sexual identity is considered a notable transition point between adolescence and adulthood. Beausang (2000) describes the first sexual experiences of youth as being “turning points” (p. 175). Plunkett (2001) adds that experimenting with sexuality in youth provides a strengthened learning experience and opportunities to challenge oppressive social elements while internalizing a sense of individual agency. Experimenting with emerging sexuality also provides opportunities for youth to create new peer-based memories that are separate from the memories involving parents (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Developing identity occurs through interaction and learning with sexual partners, who may themselves be negotiating sexual development and identity, offering a more sex-positive environment embedded within a process of shared responsibility, growth and struggle (Allen, Husser, Stone, & Jordal, 2008; Beausang, 2000; Jewkes et al., 2009).

“[Boyfriend] says lots of girls like to cuddle, lots of girls like to do this, and I’m like, I don’t. Most girls do but I don’t...I guess we didn’t really know each other that well.”
(Uma, age 19)

Youth acknowledge, however, that there are sexuality concerns that peers may not be psychologically prepared to help with. Sexuality crises (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007), concerns which place youth in a position of vulnerability (Stone, 1988), and sexuality issues that may be perceived as shameful or embarrassing (Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006) have been avoided in sexuality communication between peers. Researchers note that when this occurs, youth may experience distress when unable to find a channel for communication

(Gilchrist & Sullivan, 2006). Another avenue of support for youth when peers are unavailable is found in family (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007; Stone, 1988).

Siblings are noted in research as allies (Gorman-Murray, 2008) and as educators (Walker, 2004). The presence of siblings that are close in age also predicts whether families will communicate openly about sexuality (Walker, 2004), and other researchers observe that the presence of a sibling who is parenting increases the likelihood that sexuality communication occurs in the home (Rucibwa, Modeste, Montgomery, & Fox, 2003). There is a wealth of research on the importance of sibling relationships within families and their characterization as life-long, affectionate and pleasurable connections (see Rocca, Martin, & Dunleavy, 2010), however there is little research on sexual identity communication and siblings.

Zimmerman & Dickerson (1994) write that parents play a role in shaping the initial outline of the life story of their child, and that as youth inform their self-concept youth are filling in the metaphorical blanks. Parents are influential in how sexual identity is developed, providing a place to evaluate and nurture values and beliefs (Bond, 2003; hooks, 1990; McKay, Pietrusiak, & Holowaty, 1998). Parents also offer a model of how a person can act in a relationship (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002; Shomaker & Furman, 2009; Stone, 1988).

*"I've learned you have to be very consistent, where my mom's more a jellyfish...don't rock the boat. I turned completely opposite of that, like my brother will often say to me you're such a b*tch. And I'll say, yeah I am." (Xia, mother of two)*

Parents model how to recognize a person who is accessible and responsive. If a quality relationship exists with parents, youth are more likely to form other healthy relationships (Dalton, Frick-Horbury, & Kitzmann, 2006). Research indicates that parent relationships that are characterized as supportive predict whether youth will have supportive romantic relationships (Furman et al., 2002; Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Cauffman, & Spieker, 2009). Relationships with parents predict whether a person will discuss sexuality openly with partners (Jaccard, Dodge, & Dittus, 2002), and their feelings of acceptance toward bodily changes and creative and intellectual growth that occurs during development (Furman et al., 2002). The relational models of parents influence how youth respond to future social and sexual relationships.

Bond (2003) remarks that reflecting upon sexuality and relationships with parents provide youth a pathway to access information and services that help them make healthy decisions, with others adding that this specifically includes accessing sexual health services and contraception (Jones, Purcell, Sing, & Fivler, 2005). Furthermore, family discussion about sexuality addresses myths that youth may have about the efficacy of contraception (Woods, Hensel, & Fortenberry, 2009), and provides opportunities for youth to consider sexual behaviour in advance of sexual activity, thus being more prepared to be active agents in sexuality decision-making (Lappin, 1994).

Despite the health and relational benefits of communicating about sexual identity between parents and youth, research indicates sexual identity is a topic that is avoided by both parents and youth (Averett, Benson, & Vaillancourt, 2008; Brock & Jennings, 1993; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Ogle, Glasier, & Riley, 2008; Peremans et al, 2000; Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002; see also Jones et al., 2005). Some researchers suggest that youth think twice

about discussing sexuality with their parents because they anticipate a negative response from parents. Although this is a barrier to sexuality communication it does not influence youth sexual activity (Hampton, McWatters, Jeffrey, & Smith, 2005). Youth and parents also indicate concern that sexuality discussions are treated lightly and not taken seriously (Jaccard et al., 2002). Youth also reveal that they are not likely to discuss sexual health if their parents use fear-based language when discussing sexuality at home (Holland, et al., 1998). Afifi, Joseph, & Aldesi (2008) add that when parents use fear appeals to discuss sexuality with youth, youth are more likely to rate the parent-child relationship quality as poor.

Fear of disapproval and disconnection are multiplied for youth negotiating nonhetero sexual identities. Both Ryan (2009) and Wang, Bih, & Brennan (2009) write that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth often meet resistance in discussing sexual identity with parents, and that youth sometimes experience this as rejection.

“I was feeling all these guilt feelings for being a human, like wanting to have sex and being bisexual.” (Zabrina, mother of three)

Cates (2007) describes that some parents seek treatments designed to change sexual orientation of children, known as conversion or reparative therapy. This may be disparaging to youth and is noted by researchers and licensing agencies as being socially and psychologically harmful (see American Psychological Association, 2006; Hein & Matthews, 2010). Muñoz-Laboy et al (2009) adds that nonhetero youth report feeling they are under the “constant surveillance” (p. 331) of parents if they attempt to form nonhetero friendships or access information about nonhetero sexual identities. Youth negotiating nonhetero sexual identities are effected by this perceived rejection, showing depression (Bond, Hefner, &

Drogos, 2009; Ryan, 2009), perceptions of personal failure (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002) and higher likelihood of sexual risk behaviours (Haldeman, 2002; Ryan, 2009). Ryan (2009) adds, however, that “caregivers thought what they were doing would help their children have a better life, fit in, and be accepted by others” (p. 8) and that these actions come from a place of love for the youth. In an effort to preserve the relationships between parents and youth, sexual identity communication is sometimes avoided, creating a gap where relational values and sexual desires could otherwise be incorporated.

Social institutions. Gergen (1999) describes social institutions as the structures in society that influence how we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world (see also Giroux, 2006). By evaluating messages delivered through social institutions, we may integrate messages into how we define ourselves, influencing the development of identity and self-concept (Gergen, 1999; see also Giroux, 2006; Raissiguier, 1995). Social institutions include political debate and economics, religion, and different forms of media that could play a role in influencing sexual identity and how sexuality is communicated.

Politics and economics. Politics engages the public eye through political discussion and debate, politically mandated programming, and also through funding. Political debate leads to changes in laws and criminal code. For example, political discourse on the protection of minors has led to a recent change in the age of consent to sexual intercourse, and also related changes to language around gender and sexual orientation in the Criminal Code (Canada Library of Parliament [CLP], 2007). School-based sexual health education is also a politically guided and publicly funded program, which is developed around political discourse. Politics sometimes provide national standards of practice, such as those related to the criminal code. However, school-based sex education is delivered as a result of local

policymakers and parental boards, and therefore more specific to the unique locales in which it is delivered (Lokanc-Diluzio, Cobb, Harrison, & Nelson, 2007; McKay et al., 1998; see also Goldman, 2008; Nonn et al., 2009). According to research, local youth find the material presented in publicly funded sexual health education lacking practical information and overly focused on protection (Soon, 2009).

“The first time I was [in sex ed in school], I was wondering why are they showing me this stuff, like sore, sore female parts and stuff like that? I’m like why are you guys doing this, I don’t want to see this, this ain’t right.” (Wood, age 20)

Indeed, age of consent laws are also termed “age of protection” (CLP, 2007, n.p.). This suggests that sex is dangerous and something to guard oneself against (see Shoveller et al, 2004). This may also suggest a need for material that includes more practical information about developing sexuality, to include positive sexual health outcomes in the political discourse (Byers, Sears, Voyer, Thurlow, Cohen, & Weaver, 2003; Clark, et al., 2009; SIECCAN, 2009; Soon, 2009).

The political mainstream may sometimes overlook social and cultural differences in beliefs about sexuality. Anderssen & Hellesum (2009) note that a “nuclear family” (p. 102) is often a reference point for political discourse about sexuality. Families who do not fit the nuclear family standard are represented as either worthy or unworthy minorities. Reid and Herbert (2005) further illustrate this point through the belief that poverty and single motherhood are related. These are both political and economic issues which at times result in a public labelling of the “welfare mom” (p. 161) (see also Corcoran et al., 2000). Other political discussions bring the criminal justice system into the politics of parenting, suggesting

that parents that do not pay child support should be legally sanctioned through fines or imprisonment (Garfinkel, Miller, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998). Placing *family* within a political discussions may demean qualities of significant relational importance, such as respect and emotional interdependence, characteristics that support sexual health and sexuality communication (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Muñoz-Laboy et al, 2009).

Economics and financial considerations often underlie the political discourse in public and private decision-making, and although sexual health education is a publicly funded program, there are individual-level financial categories that influence access to sexual health. Much of the research on sexual health is related to risk categories, many based in economic security. Miller (2002) suggests that living in an impoverished neighbourhood predicts lower levels of contraceptive use.

“I was introduced at the shelter because I didn’t have a home...I was just about to give birth when they helped me find my own home again. I have been on independent living since I was 15, and when I ran away from my boyfriend I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t have any source of income.” (Vita, age 20)

Kirby (2002) adds that attendance at schools with more resources to empower students towards academic achievement and involvement, along with goals of higher education, protect youth from early unwanted pregnancies. Some research cites income as a significant predictor of sexuality outcomes for youth, as income predicts community resources and access to jobs for youth and parents (Corcoran et al., 2000). Youth living in an urban area described how stereotypes of both being young and living in areas considered impoverished influenced their identity development, expressing how they felt the economic situation of their neighbourhood

defined “expectations of who we should be or who we will be” (Rios-Moore, et al., 2004, p. 5). Youth went on to say that the economic situation within their neighbourhood perpetuates a cycle of demoralization, and that community development should include space where youth “can be themselves without having to worry about so many pressures” (Rios-Moore, et al., 2004, p. 7).

Communities relying on natural resource extraction, such as lumber and oil/gas present a second economic culture relevant to health outcomes. Researchers have noted that *boom* communities often have an influx of young male employees, an increase of money, increasing rates of drug and alcohol consumption, and an increase in housing needs (Goldenberg, Shoveller, Koehoorn, & Ostry, 2010; Green, 2007). Researchers note that more investigation is necessary on how these social issues within the community impact health outcomes (Niven & McLeod, 2009).

Religion. There are many programs developed by religious institutions that are intended to affect emerging sexual identity. Our Whole Lives is a Unitarian Universalist church-based sexual health program which includes additional values of inclusivity and self-worth integrated into the programming for ages five to 35. The intent is for learners to “make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health and behaviour” (n.p.) through personal clarification of values and an increased understanding of the emotional, spiritual, and social aspects of sexual behaviour (Unitarian Universalist Association, 2010). The Kama Shastra, of both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, describes respectful relationships with sexual partners, with teachings of love as one of the most sacred worldly gains (Vatsyayana, trans. 2003). Other religious organizations include chastity and fidelity as a sexual health framework, the hoped for outcome being an absence of harmful sexual behaviours (Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2010; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2005). Manlove, Logan, Moore, and Ikramullah (2008) observed the positive influence of religious institutions on emerging sexual identity, however these characteristics are moderated by a cohesive family environment.

“Sex was never talked about. Never at home....a lot of it stemmed from my stepdad, he was raised back east in a very strong Catholic home.” (Xia, mother of two)

Families that participate in research indicate that they would like sexuality to be taught within the church framework. Mothers in a faith-based sexuality program felt there is a need for integration of sexuality into the tenets of church education (Cornelius, 2009), and grandparents also recognized church as a source for sexuality education for youth and caregivers (Cornelius, LeGrand, & Jemmott, 2008). Other researchers noted that religiosity impacted the types of sexuality discussions that occurred in the family (El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009; Yip, 2004), sometimes offering a “reactionary” foundation upon which sexuality is developed (Donnelly, p. 1610; see also Lefkowitz, 2005; Ruocco, 2010).

*“When I was a teen we were told, and this wasn’t my mom, this was the church that I went to specifically. It was all about you don’t date, you find the person you’re predestined to marry and you marry them. You don’t have sex until you’re married and very much about this predestined thing, which is totally f*cked up compared to what I believe now.” (Zabrina, mother of three)*

Media. Media institutions such as music and movies cultivate “out-of-school literacies” (Hallman, 2009, p. 36) where people have opportunities to actively choose what they are relating to.

“This one time I did [brother’s] whole room in pornography. I think he was proud of it, actually .I thought he was gonna get mad but he didn’t want to take it down.”

(Wood, age 20)

Although mass media is sometimes described as having a negative influence on youth (see MacBeth, 2004; Peremans et al., 2000) out-of-school literacies also offer participation in informal learning and alternative methods of communicating. hooks (1994) describes music as a method of reflecting upon cultural values. She notes that it is “important to see ‘mis’ representations of youth sexuality as actual representations of sexuality, viewing them as a reflection of dominant values in our culture rather than as an aberrant pathological standpoint” (p. 116). Community-centred media, such as that found in music and movies, allows a peek at how society views sexuality and desire, reflecting community norms and messages about ways to communicate sexuality (hooks, 1994; Starkshall, Santelli, & Hirsh, 2007). When given opportunities to interact with music and movies, people may challenge community norms against their own ideas for self-concept and sexual identity. Bastien (2009) suggests that musicians often shape sexuality discourse by widening the discussion to include linked social issues and thus are potential “opinion leaders” (p. 1357). Chee Mamuk (2010) created the local productions *Star in Your Own Stories* to offer youth opportunities to develop sexual health campaigns through documentary productions. *Street Spirits* (2010) presents interactive theatre allowing audience members to respond to sexual health and socialization issues by generating audience responses to social dilemmas. These programs have a common goal, that of challenging participants to reflect on their identity and possible selves through out-of-school literacies, expanding ways of understanding sexuality and how it is communicated.

“[Youngest daughter] doesn’t need to know what tweaking means...and you know, prostitution, she doesn’t need to know. She knows all this stuff through [media].” (Xia, mother of two)

Media can have a positive effect on developing a sexual self-concept and how that is communicated. Media sends a sex-positive message that people may find easy to relate to (Bond et al., 2009; Sutton et al., 2002; Soon, 2009), and also includes messages increasing positive expectations about sex (Fisher et al., 2009). However, media also delivers messages about sexual identity that may be detrimental to self-concept. Images of attractiveness are sometimes equated to vulnerability or innocence, which could influence feelings and actions of sexual agency (Jhally, 2002). Other media messages may conflict with healthy messages, and this could have a negative influence on how sexuality is communicated (Teitelman et al., 2009).

Bond et al. (2009) suggest media has a beneficial effect for nonhetero youth. Youth-positive messages for nonhetero youth are readily available through internet, a media outlet associated with decreased feelings of loneliness and enhanced self-esteem for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning sexual identities. This may be missing from other social institutions (Bond, et al., 2009). An emerging body of research notes the influence of online social networking in the development of knowledge about sexuality and how it is enacted. Some researchers suggest that gender roles and heteronormative beliefs are enacted online (Van Doorn, 2010), while others point to the supportive environment for youth and young adult sexuality (Silenzio, Duberstein, Tang, Lu, Tu, & Homan, 2009). The influence of media on sexuality communication is diverse and continues to evolve.

The literature on self-concept, connections with peers and family members and relating to self within the community and society show different ways that emerging sexuality is conceptualized. This influences how comfortable and confident people feel in communicating sexuality in different settings. The relationships noted here may be spaces where a person can reflect upon sexual identity, offering potential opportunities toward engaging in sexuality communication in the family.

Parents Respond to Sexuality of Youth

How parents respond to sexuality communication offers a reflective foil against which thoughts and actions can be generated, with research indicating that parent response to sexuality motivates decision-making for youth (Kao, Guthrie, & Loveland-Cherry, 2007; McLean & Thorne, 2003; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Pratt, Arnold, & Mackey, 2001). Parental responses to sexuality are varied, including sex-specific content of parent responses to emerging sexual identity, responses based on the sexual health knowledge of parents, and parent perceptions of sexual health risks to youth. Parents report that they are interested in being informed of what sexual health topics are being discussed in school-based programs in order that they may actively participate in their child's health education (Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000), and are able to take part in content development for school-based sexual health education (Smith, Buzi, Weinman, & Mumford, 2001). Parents also indicate that they would like more involvement with school-based programs, especially how to integrate different topics into sexuality discussions occurring in the family setting (Davies, Horton, Williams, Martin, & Stewart, 2009). McKay et al. (1998) lists a number of topics in which parents indicate interest, including bodily changes during sexual maturity and pregnancy prevention, and that parents attempt to address these topics in family discussions.

“There was a time where [daughter] was asking me how babies got out. And I thought, what is she asking me here? And so I go, well the baby grows in the mommy’s tummy. But she goes, Oh I know, I know, how do they get out? So I explained the delivery to her and she was kinda horrified and I thought, should I tell her the rest now. But she didn’t ask how they got in.” (Zabrina, mother of three)

Other research indicates that parents are very willing to openly discuss sexuality topics related to relationships and dating behaviour (Averett et al., 2008; Heisler, 2005; Ogle et al., 2008). Parents are also likely to discuss topics related to morals and abstinence (Heisler, 2005; Matyastick et al., 2008). Some researchers add that parents are uncomfortable discussing intercourse (Ogle et al., 2008) and are unlikely to open discussions related to nonheterosexual behaviour (Calzo & Ward, 2009) and masturbation (El-Shaieb & Wurtele, 2009).

Comfort and confidence of parents. The level of comfort parents feel in addressing sexuality may be related to their own feelings of effectiveness and confidence (Ballard & Gross, 2009; Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008; Pluhar, DiIorio, & McCarty, 2008).

[About teaching his children sexual health] “Sometimes I see it on TV and it’s like, oh god. I kinda hope the school helps me with that one a little bit.” (Wood, age 20)

In an intervention designed to improve sexual health communication, parents who completed a program including both communication skills and sexual health facts resulted in an increased number of new sexual health topics that parents brought up in family discussions, and feelings of improved ability to communicate with youth (Schuster et al., 2008; Villarruel, Cherry, Cabriaes, Ronis, & Yan, 2008). A similar group program for mothers was successful

in decreasing discomfort at discussing sexual health topics, and also decreasing the number of restrictive messages that are discussed (Woody, Randall & D'Souza, 2008). Walker (2004) suggests that by involving parents more actively in the sexual health of youth, parents feel more empowered and are more aware of realities of youth sexuality, resulting in a more open atmosphere for these discussions. Byers et al. (2008) adds that including parents in sexual health education efforts is more effective overall due to the increased acceptance and openness to the school-based education efforts in the home environment. Youth indicate that receiving sexual health education from parents help youth feel skilled at communicating with partners about sexuality and contraception (Byers, et al., 2003; de Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Woertman, Keijers, Meijer, & Meeus, 2010; Walker, 2004; see also Haldre, Rahu, Rahu, & Karro, 2009). This decreases the likelihood of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection.

What moms know. Although education for parents improves sexuality responses, parents may not realize that they do not have the type of sexual health knowledge that youth find useful. Some researchers indicate that parents rated themselves as effective sexual health communicators, while youth rated parents poorly (Byers, et al., 2003; Jaccard et al., 2002; Marhefka, Mellins, Brackis-Cott, Dolezal, & Ehrhardt, 2009; McKay, 1996). Ballard and Gross (2009) note from parent focus groups that parent perceptions on their sexual health knowledge was based on their personal experience with sexual health education, including the comfort of their own parents in discussing sexual health. Parents note that most of their sexuality education was taught by their mothers (Averett et al., 2008; Byers et al., 2008; Holland et al., 1998). Stone (1988) suggests that women are often responsible for upholding relationships, and that therefore sexuality communication falls into a mother's realm of

communication (see also Ward, 2000). There is an abundance of research indicating that mothers *are* responsible for sexual health education.

“[Father of daughters] is on the outside...he’s not part of it, he’s never part of the discussion...he just leaves it to me, he’s just you deal with it.” (Xia, mother of two)

Mothers teach youth gender role expectations, including the role of sexuality in relationships (Averett et al., 2008; Dittus, Jaccard, & Gordon, 1999; Lam, Russell, Tan, & Leong, 2008; Pluhar et al., 2008; Stiffler, Sims, & Stern, 2007). Mothers also recall that they felt more open to discuss sexual relationships with children than what male parents felt. This is especially true for topics related to relationships, pregnancy and contraceptive use (Heisler, 2005; Hutchinson, 2002; Marhefka, et al., 2009; Ogle et al., 2008). Mothers have also been observed having a conversational style that includes asking more questions over lecturing. It may be that youth find this more comfortable for addressing sensitive topics such as sexuality (Boone & Lefkowitz, 2007; Sneed, 2008). Mothers are also more likely to use their own stories as tools for teaching social skills used in relationships (Alea & Buck, 2003; Bohanek, et al., 2009).

“I hope on the girls’ side that the father of their children is totally involved, not so set back like [their father] was. As for my two sons, I want them to be solely involved and have like 50-50 if not 60-40 split. As a mom raising young kids it’s not easy. It’s tough...so I want my kids to kick in more...I never got that.” (Yovela, mother of four)

The abundance of research indicating that mothers are responsible for sexual health discussions may lead to difficulties related to the gendered result of sexual health discussions. Mothers may reflect on their gendered position in society, resulting in an influence on

discussing sexuality (Canella & Manuelito, 2008). Mothers in Woody et al. (2008) indicated that they experienced guilt when discussing sexuality with youth. These researchers suggest this is possibly a result of the asexual representation of women in social messages (see also Averett et al., 2008). Social perceptions of mothers being responsible for the “success and viability of the family” (p. 344) reinforces mothers using a protective discourse when discussing sexuality (Ward, 2000). A gendered social message may improve the ability for youth to integrate knowledge of multiple systems affecting youth sexuality, perhaps finding themselves better prepared to base their sexual knowledge on intersecting social systems and desired self-concept (Townsend, 2008; see also Ward, 2000).

Parent perception of risk. Parent response to sexuality is based in part on the risks that are perceived towards youth, based in multiple beliefs. For instance, researchers discuss that families that are exposed to nonsexual risks are more likely to discuss sex-related risks. Both Letiecq (2007) and Teitelman and Loveland-Cherry (2004) note that families that live in impoverished neighbourhoods that are characterized as violent were likely to report that sexual health topics were discussed.

“I just always tell my girls to be cautious, and I want to teach my son the same way.

Because of the neighbourhood we live in, I can see the girls trying to be scandalous. It is a big scandal out there.” (Vita, age 20)

Other researchers note that families that include a history of substance use integrate sexuality into family discussions (Marvel, Rose, Colon-Perez, DiClemente, & Liddle, 2009). Parents who believe that youth are sexually active are also likely to discuss sexuality (Dittus et al., 1999; Marhefka et al., 2009; see also Jacobs, Chin & Shaver, 2005; Ward, 2000).

Research also indicates that parents perceive more sex-specific risk to daughters than sons, and are therefore more likely to discuss sexuality with daughters (Dubowitz, Lane, Greif, Jensen, & Lamb, 2006). Older youth are also considered to be more likely to be sexually active, and therefore age is a predictor of sexuality communication between parents and youth (Byers et al., 2008). Research adds that perceptions of risk may be related to traditional social roles of gender and family. Young women are more likely to receive risk-related discussions of resistance to social pressures. Young women are also challenged to expand traditional gender roles (Valk, 2008; Ward, 2000). Young men on the other hand rarely hear messages challenging traditional masculinity (Averett et al., 2008; Ehrensaft, 2007; Sion & Ben-Ari, 2009). Sexuality discussions are also notably heterosexual, with parents utilizing a heterosexual reference point. Calzo and Ward (2009) criticize the lack of research investigating how youth learn about nonheterosexual identities within the family (see also Ryan, 2009).

Although parents may base discussions on perceived sexuality of youth some research indicates that parents do not accurately predict the timing of sexual behaviour of youth. Beckett et al (2010) reported that half of the youth in their study had engaged in genital touching, and 40% in intercourse before their parents had addressed sexuality. A second study found that 40% of the youth accessing sexual health services at a family planning clinic had not discussed sexuality or sexual activity with parents (Jones et al., 2005). Marhefka et al (2009) adds survey results indicating mothers did not accurately predict the debut of their child's sexual behaviour. Although these researchers question whether parents are accurate in perceiving the risks of negative sexual health outcomes of youth, it is important to note that youth often quickly recall discussions with their parents regarding values, relationships, and

morals (Heisler, 2005; Jaccard et al., 2002; Pratt et al., 2001). Parents also discuss decision-making and life opportunities (Byers, et al., 2003; Starkshall et al., 2007; Teitelman & Loveland-Cherry, 2004) and self-respect and shame (Gossart, 2002; Matyastick et al., 2008; Proweller, 2000). These topics are likely intended to provide foundational pieces of self-concept, sexual identity, and protection from risk communicated between parents and youth, although the content is not necessarily specific to sexuality.

Family management requires attention to daily parenting concerns that may overshadow explicit sexuality communication. For instance, parents of youth managing developmental disabilities report that they are very unlikely to discuss sexuality with youth, with some parents preferring that issues of youth sexuality were *not* discussed. Furthermore, parents indicated that intimate relationships for youth with developmental disabilities are actively avoided (Evans, McGuire, Healty, & Carlay, 2009; see also Macpherson, Collins-Atkins, Gregory, Slade, & Lerescu, 2008). Emerging research indicates that youth and parent perceptions of developmental challenges influences negatives perceptions on the potential for social connections, and increased stress within the family system (Getty, 2010). For these parents, the life and health concerns surrounding the developmental needs of youth take priority over sexuality.

Families that are under-represented in popular depictions of families also find themselves managing sexuality while being embedded in social activism. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning parents or youth are generally under-represented in media and school-based sexual health programs, therefore families may find themselves lacking socially normed scripts (Socha, Sanchez-Hucles, Bromley, & Kelly, 1995; see also DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Some researchers describe the lack of nohetero representation as increasing

harassment and stigmatization for parents and youth (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

Anderssen & Hellesun (2009) note that discourse around nonhetero sexualities of parents appears to question whether the parent's sexuality will be harming to children (see also DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). When these attitudes have a negative effect on the relationships of parents, parents describe feeling less social support and report more negative life events (Julien, Jouvin, Jodoin, l'Archeveque, & Chartrand, 2008). Youth are impacted when parents have low social support. In two research studies, youth noted they experienced homophobic attitudes from friends, family, and society in general (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Fairtlough, 2008), although Bos and van Balen (2008) add that youth are protected from the psychological distress of discriminatory attitudes through high-quality relationships with parents (see also Sheets & Mohr, 2009). The response of parents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth is varied. Friedman and Morgan (2009) report that youth find parents less helpful when negotiating communication about nonheterosexual concerns. Wang et al. (2009) add that parents consider nonheterosexual relationships of youth as a source of major conflict in the family. However, Wang et al. (2009) suggests that, with time, parents of nonheterosexual youth may experience their own "coming out" (p. 285) where the meaning of a nonheterosexual identity is perceived as a means to achieving lasting relationships or perhaps a meaningful spiritual path. Gorman-Murray (2008) suggests that topics often missed in research with nonhetero sexual parents or youth is when the family home becomes a site of active resistance to social stigma and discrimination. The "central narrative" (p. 31) of nonhetero sexuality activism into the family life provides opportunities for family bonding. The family can become an informed community of emotional and social support, supporting

healthy and diverse experiences of sexuality and relationships (Ehrensaft, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2008; Broad, Alden, Berkowitz, & Ryan, 2008; Sheets & Mohr, 2009).

Parent culture. Through cultural beliefs and practices, families participate in building relationships. Culturally constructed beliefs about relationships include beliefs about sexuality and sexual behaviour. Parents respond differently when they feel that youth have acknowledged cultural practices in enacting sexuality (Holland et al., 1998). This includes acknowledging the importance of *familism*, including interdependence of the family and community (Aukrust, Edwards, Kumru, Knoche, & Kim, 2003; Greenfield et al., 2000; Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2009), the importance of family honour in making decisions about communication and sexuality (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2009; Yip, 2004), and displaying respectful behaviour both within and outside of the family context (DuBois, 2008; Greenfield et al., 2000; Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2009).

“The social worker would come talk to the elementary school and talk to me but I felt like I had to protect [mom].” (Wood, age 20)

Honouring the value of familism impacts how parents perceive youth sexuality and how that is communicated in the home. Knowledge of parental language and culture-specific traditions have been discussed in research as providing protection against social and health risks, and researchers explain this phenomenon in different ways. Researchers describe the presence of an imagined future for a family’s culture as providing a framework for personal persistence, which influences individual health behaviours (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Chilcote & Chandler, 2008; Myers et al, 1999). Gergen et al. (2004) add that cultural continuity is based in a sense of group solidarity, supporting healthy development,

including sexual identity. However, there is also research suggesting that negotiating a bicultural identity is a source of conflict between parents and youth, and a barrier to sexuality communication. Ochberg & Comeau (2001) note that parents place value upon an ethic of hard work and respect for elders are troubled by the questioning nature of youth. Parents participating in this research perceived a sense of youth entitlement, which did not reflect parental values or expectations. Kao et al., (2007) agree, reporting that youth felt distressed by the overly protective nature of their mother's cultural traditions. This influenced sexuality messages passed from mother to child, which the youth could not relate to. Cultural expectations held by parents and youth influence the responses of communication about sexuality in the family. Research indicates there are both factors within culture that are protective to youth health, with some divergence between cultural beliefs of parents and youth creating barriers to sexuality communication.

Daily acts of parenting. Shah and Shah (2009) suggest that rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections reflect the “apparent inability of parents...[to provide] teenagers with proper sexual education” (p.658). However, I submit that this is an oversimplification of the complex daily life of parenting. Parents are continually negotiating a relationship with youth through conversation, actions, and anticipated responses (Bohanek et al., 2009; McShane et al., 2009; Morgan, Thorne, & Zurbriggen, 2010). Parents may hold back responses about sexuality because they fear it will create conflict with youth (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Taris & Semin, 1997; Stafford & Dainton, 1995; Wilbraham, 2008). Parents may also avoid talking with youth about sexuality to avoid youth feeling as though their character is being questioned (Izugbara, 2008; Proweller, 2000; see also Ehrlich, 2003). Non-biological parents, such as step-parents and foster parents, report difficulty in overall

communication with youth in the family, creating barriers to discussions specific to sexuality (Dubowitz et al., 2006; Schenck et al., 2009). Parents are also negotiating the difficulties of family responsibilities and social barriers to health, such as financial resources and safety. Some researchers note that lack of housing security impacts the daily perceptions of parents, and this impacts sexuality communication in the family (Rew, Grady, Whittaker, & Bowman, 2008; Wesley, 2009).

“With my first partner, I was the one that had to get the home, had to get the stuff for my home, had to get it together. He was the one with the money and he could spend it on whatever he wants but I had to clothe them, feed them, and do this do that.” (Vita, age 20)

Moffitt (2004) adds that living in a remote community limits health resources for parents and youth, impacting communication. Greene (1994) and Wilbraham (2008) suggest that a conflict-free discussion about sexuality is a myth that presumes a willing parent and an agentic youth. Rather, parents and youth continually negotiate the relational and social stressors of life, hoping that connections can be sustained (Davies et al., 2009; Ryan, 2009; Nam et al., 2009), family can be protected (Wesley, 2009; see also Haldre et al., 2009) and room and board can be maintained (Proweller, 2000; Rew et al., 2008; see also Greene, 1994). The daily business of being a family along with the knowledge and risk perceived by parents influence how parents respond to youth sexuality.

Family Patterns of Communicating

Families have unique ways of exchanging sexuality information. Some of these patterns are based in the use of specific language. Families also have special ways of

spending time together that influence how discussions unfold. There are diverse ways families experience quality of relationship that influences how these points intersect, important considerations when developing ideas about sexuality communication in the family. Suggesting that sexuality communication is simply transferred between parents and youth simplifies a complicated process. Communication may be planned and well-informed through communication interventions as described in previous pages. However, more often family discussions are conversational, situational, and based on topics as they arise (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Stafford & Dainton, 1995; Valsiner & Litvinovic, 1996). Circumstances surrounding conversational exchanges are constantly changing. Relationships are also transforming as self-concept and identity is evolving. Parents report that as their involvement in the lives of youth change, their relationships and ability to communicate in the family also change (Brock & Beazley, 1995). Behavioural attitudes of youth and parents evolve as both are exposed to expectancies and how that is integrated into self-concept and self in the family (Jaccard et al., 2002). Family conversations are an integration of an ever-changing context, and often informal exchanges that focus on the needs of the present moment (Valsiner & Litvinovic, 1996).

Shared language. When parents and youth share an original language, sexuality outcomes are healthier than when there is a literal language negotiation (Myers, et al., 1999; see also Chandler et al., 2003). Communication within a family may be strained or difficult when nuances of language cannot be expressed, resulting in feelings of alienation, isolation, or lack of ability to fully express emotions (Jilek-Aall, 1988; Kumar, Trofimovich, & Gatbonton, 2008). Battiste (1998) adds that “deep and lasting cognitive bonds that affect our shared life and belief of how the world works” (p. 19) are inherent in language. Relational stress may

result when families cannot share these bonds through original language. Interactive nuances of culture are also preserved when families communicate through a shared original language. Multi-lingual youth note difficulties in adjusting communicative styles of language when talking in families. (Greenfield et al., 2000; Kao et al., 2007; Stodoiska, 2008).

Protective language. The nuances of language are important in understanding family communication patterns, and specific word choices are notable. Many of the patterns of sexuality communication noted in research consist of protection and avoidance. McKee and Karasz (2006) state that “mothers and daughters agree that sexual activity threatens girls’ health and future” (p. 158). Epstein and Ward (2008) shared that youth in their study are told by family members to “always use protection” (p. 113). There are many other researchers that note the threatening nature of sexuality (see Clarke et al., 2009; Jordan et al., 2000; McKay et al., 1998; Proweller, 2000; Spencer, Maxwell, & Aggleton, 2008).

“Wouldn’t you rather be safe? Wouldn’t you rather at least know that [your daughter] isn’t gonna get pregnant?” (Zabrina, mother of three)

Gergen (1999) suggests that absolute language implies that one position is preferred over another. By suggesting that sexual behaviour is a threat to health and the future, what may be hinted is that in order to protect health and have a positive future, sexuality is to be avoided (see MacPherson & Fine, 1995; Shoveller, Johnson, Langille, & Mitchell, 2004). Other types of language use emerge when families share information about sexuality. hooks (1990) describes *tongues of fire*, a method of interaction between Black mothers and daughters. “Tongues of fire” illustrates how mothers, through honest and sometimes severe responses, instil in daughters preparation to resist multiple forms of oppression. Mothers

prepare daughters to resist a downtrodden attitude toward the world by teaching that there is no sense in complaining about one's place in the world, but rather to work hard to resist when others say you can't do it, and to instill a sense of battle in young women. Ward (2000) describes this as a mother both refusing to become stuck in her daughter's feelings of disappointment while also being honest about her own anger. The intended unspoken message is to toughen up and never let others see how you are bothered. This use of language is a method of transferring empowering messages to daughters, while also teaching about the world in which women live. The language described here illustrates some ways that families represent their truths, organization of self, and communication styles.

Silence. Foucault (1978) notes that silence is a communicative device, suggesting both censorship of sexuality as well as an opportunity to reflect upon appropriate ways of communicating. Silence has been identified as a language technique which might offer participant turn-taking, or might provide space for the speaker to hold conversational control (Mushin & Gardner, 2009; Nakane, 2006). Holland et al. (1998) note that silence provides opportunities for youth to reflect upon the importance of what is unsaid in sexuality communication. They add that by responding to sexuality communication with silence they might be defying the sexuality beliefs that are encompassed in the dialogue. Researchers also add that through silence, sexuality is accessed in internal dialogue rather than through the public discourse (Thorne & McLean, 2003; Ward, 2000). Silence is noted as a language device for reflecting, and also for taking an oppositional position to the expectations of others.

Teen parents. Families that include teen parents show unique patterns of communicating about sexuality. Teen parenting is noted in research as offering a self-defining moment for youth. Youth note that parenting gave them a sense of value and

affirmed more positive alternative possibilities for their lives (Foster, 2004). Teen parents had an increased interest in their education and employment goals after becoming parents (Zachry, 2005). Teens coping with social issues such as poverty, social oppression, and neighbourhood violence noted that the experience of becoming a parent provided opportunities where they could reflect more on the potential of caring and equal relationships (Lesser, Tello, Koniak-Griffin, Kappos, & Rhys, 2001). Teen parents seem to orient themselves to the future as an effect of the birth of their children, something that may not have been a reality prior to pregnancy.

“I was drunk most of the time...and then I got pregnant and I didn’t want to hurt the baby and so I quit.” (Uma, age 19)

Teen parents may also be in a position of increased social support as a result of their pregnancy, and therefore have access to health resources that may not have been present prior to pregnancy (Shoveller, Chabot, Johnson, Prkachin, & Wallace, 2005; Zachry, 2005). This may be a reason that children of teen parents are more likely to have knowledge of contraception and comfort discussing sexuality, as some researchers note (Bonell et al., 2006). Smithbattle (2008) suggests that teen parents are actively parenting against the “legacies” (p. 525) of their own lived experiences. This may include youth acknowledgement of difficulties shared in their families, and a desire to prevent these difficulties within their own parenting (see also Brock & Jennings, 1993).

Quality of relationships. Shared family time has positive sexual health outcomes for youth. Pearson, Muller, and Frisco (2006) describe that, through shared activities, a more positive relationship develops in families. This may provide a foundation where sexuality

communication is safely shared. By spending time together, families develop cohesion, parents are more aware of the environment where youth are spending time, and more conversation is likely to occur simply by occupying the same space (see also de Graaf et al., 2010; Dixon, 1995; Manlove et al., 2008). The shared activity of family dinnertime was enough to produce positive outcomes in parents and youth. Researchers suggest that this activity improves relationships in families, providing more avenues for sexuality communication (Pearson et al., 2006).

“We were at the table eating dinner and I right out asked [my son] if he was a virgin.”

(Yovela, mother of four)

Some research notes that parents have more involvement and awareness of youth activities, and that this is the protective nature of shared family time (de Graaf et al., 2010). However others note that parental control occurring through shared time is very different than behavioural control. Longmore, Manning, and Giordano (2001) note that youth are more protected by monitoring through shared activities than by parental input into youth activities. Stone (1988) adds that by sharing experiences of daily life with family members we are learning different ways of communicating, preferences of family members, and unique relational styles that may facilitate communication about sexuality.

Dixon (1995) aptly states “talk and the characteristics of relationship cannot be split apart (p. 46). A positive relationship influences the likelihood that parents and youth will have *any* type of discussion, and that more general communication leads to a more open style of communicating about sexuality (Calhoun & Friel, 2001; Dixon, 1995; Kan, McHale, & Ceroute, 2008; Villarruel, et al., 2008; see also Barber, 1997). Marhefka et al. (2009) adds

that mothers who reported that they would talk with youth about sexuality were only prepared to do so if there was already a baseline level of communication. Other research indicates that it is the baseline level of communication, rather than the specific topic of sexuality, that impacts how sexuality communication is transferred in families (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Bouris, 2006). It appears that baseline levels of communication perpetuate a cycle of openness within families that generate communication of all kinds. Bond (2002) suggests that an open communication style presents accessibility and engagement, therefore there is more of a likelihood that a positive, sharing relationship will result (see also Calhoun & Friel, 2001; Pratt, Norris, Hebblethwaite, & Arnold, 2008; Socha et al., 1995). Both parents and youth perceive openness as a deliberate creation of approachability, influencing how supported family members feel in honestly communicating and engaging in another person's life (McKee & Karasz, 2006; Bond, 2002; Mirkin, 1994).

High-quality relationships within families confirm a young person's positive self-concept, affirming that youth have a position of strength and wealth of knowledge in which to participate in daily family life, and in their own developing identity (Bishop, 1994; Brown, 2006; Ward, 2000). This facilitates a connected relationship within families where issues of emerging sexual identity can be shared, and parents and youth can bond through the process.

Summary of Chapter Two

The review presented in this chapter presents academic and community programming intended to explore sexual health and family communication. The focus of this chapter has been to orient the reader to the qualitative analysis, as well as to provide a foundation upon which the participant stories can be read, especially the interaction between an individual's

own identity, concept of family, and communication styles set within the context of daily life and relationships. Questions remain regarding how unique family contexts allow for parents to feel that they can attend to the relational and health needs within the family, and how sexuality communication occurs within the family setting.

Chapter Three- Methods and Approach

A qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating the complexity of individual experiences of family and sexuality. These topics are bound in culture, identity, and belief systems that are challenging to explore. Although the topics of family and of sexuality have been broadly studied through other approaches, new answers may be uncovered that place daily acts within the context of belief systems (Moen, 2006; Riessman, 1993). Through individual stories, narratives of the lived experience are explored, connecting social worlds with individual beliefs. The focus of this research is on family communication and sexuality. These two concepts of family communication and sexuality have individual and unique significance, requiring the subjective narrative facilitated through qualitative methods.

Critical Ideology

Critical social theory is based in “a politics of liberation, a reflexive discourse constantly in search of an open-ended, subversive, multi-voiced epistemology” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5). This theoretical approach aims to uncover narratives under-represented in research, in order to meet cultural aspirations of both the researchers and the participants. Critical social theory considers ways that traditions and institutions influence people’s beliefs about their place in the world. This theory highlights forms of oppression that occur through customs and conventions of society. Presumed expectations that are based in the organization of culture categorize people into oppositional positioning. I am significantly influenced by Anzaldúa (1987), the critical social theorist who wrote of the *Borderland* mentality. She describes the Borderland as a middle-space, where opposing differences are blurred. The most common example of the Borderland mentality is of the language of *Spanglish*, spoken at

the Mexico-United States border Spanglish intertwines the most recognizable pieces of Spanish and English into a third, border language that offers a connection between people, geography and culture The Borderland mentality has influenced my approach to this research topic, and my aim to create a space for dialogue and reflection of socially constructed oppositional positions

The Borderland mentality easily relates to the implied opposing line between parent and youth There are well-defined constructs in our culture of expectations of parents and youth However these constructs are arbitrary a mother is also a daughter, negotiating multiple identities and integrating knowledge from multiple realities When youth are also parents, there are further complexities in oppositional labels Youth then are negotiating the worlds of both childhood and parenthood Parents and youth continually negotiate the Borderland, sharing and expanding multiple truths as both grow within their own context The Borderland is a fitting metaphor for the parenting and family experiences of the participants within this research

Sexual behaviour is a social institution often relegated to the realm of risk However sexual relationships include emotional and behavioural connections that deepen intimacy between people Looking at sexuality through a critical lens offers opportunities for participants to imagine sexuality as something other than an institution wrought with political, moral and gendered expectations Critical social theory holds that emancipation from an oppositional label allows people to see themselves in each other, shrinking the “space between” (Brown, 2006, p 107) Providing a theoretical framework that could shrink the Border space between parents and youth can open a new and different dialogue about sexuality The expectations implicit in the socially confined roles of parent and youth may

shape communication. Critical theory suggests that participants may gain a greater understanding of how alternative views of relationships have been suppressed due to the limits placed by social expectations (Bishop, 1994). Reflecting on the knowledge of the social dilemmas within the oppositional stances allows participants to acknowledge their personal resources of resisting the limits of social institutions.

Bishop (1994) states that if the goals of the project are not set by the participants then the research cannot be empowering. In the literature reviewed previously, several research studies indicate that participants desire sexuality communication in the family. Furthermore, the process of narrative inquiry provides participants with an opportunity to direct the outcomes of the interview probe, giving the participants the space to determine what outcomes they would have for the research (see Lather, 1991; Trochim, 2006). Participating with community members in exploring how sexuality communication is experienced in their families in a non-oppressive manner, while expanding my knowledge of how this information might improve my skills as a counselor and health educator were the main goals of this research program.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is well-suited for a qualitative approach. This philosophy assumes that reality is a subjective construction, represented by descriptions based in language, culture, and consciousness (Gergen, 1999). Families, communication, and sexuality are based in cultural assumptions and interactional environments, dependent upon context and relationships. Multiple constructed meanings can emerge from participant narratives that are specific to gender, age, and beliefs. Social constructionism offers an approach to describe

how people live in relation to the constructs of family and sexuality. This description is captured here through the narrative method of storytelling.

Narrative Methodology

I have committed to working within critical social theory and social constructionism, two worldviews that highlight the importance and power in the unique voice. Stories are an integral part of human existence. Throughout time stories have been used to teach, pass history to new generations, and highlight imagination and agency (Riessman, 1993). Using a narrative method of storytelling, I have attempted to offer participants a space to share their unique stories that explore family and sexuality. Denzin and Smith (2008) describe the narrative method of storytelling as anti-oppressive as it offers a non-essentialized voice to the participants. Participants are free to offer contradictions or new information that may be taken-for-granted in other research methods. Storytelling also allows participants to honour their cultural rules and social organization in both how the story is told and where they are situated within the story (Denzin & Smith, 2008; Nielsen, 1999; Price, 1999; Smith, 1999). The narrative method of storytelling is a respectful approach to the sensitive topic of family and sexuality and fitting for my commitment to critical social theory.

Storytelling also allows a person to reflect, through ordering their experiences, on how his or her individual truth is known. This type of dialogue allows a person to be situated within her or his past and reflect on other outcomes that might have been. Participants can justify their actions by explaining their past and considering what may occur in the future. The narrative method of storytelling allows participants to reflect on their identity as they are situated in their relational world (Freire, 1973; Riessman, 1993). Parents reflected on some

of the social expectations of their role and thus provide input on their positioning. Youth that are parents had the chance to explore the intersection of the roles of parent and teen in their lives. Participants also positioned themselves relative to other families, reflecting on alternative ways of being together relationally (Gergen, 1999). The narrative method of storytelling has proven valuable in this exploration of the intersection of social construction and critical social theory when working with participants in socially recognized roles of family, and the socially defined topic of sexuality.

Process of Inquiry

Self-location. Over the past ten years I have been working in the field of sexual health, as a front-line worker for an HIV/AIDS wellness centre, a youth researcher, and most recently as a counsellor for survivors of sexual abuse. In all three contexts, discussions abound regarding the relevance and influence of family on sexual health. Reflecting on my own family and their shaping of my decisions, I realize that the connection between family and sexual health is not explicit. Scripts exchanged between health educators and parents, the influence of my siblings and grandparents, and my own intentions in relationships with intimate partners all create a complex web that influenced my actions. This led me to consider the ways that research may overlook the complexity of the lived experience of family when designing sexual health programs. My own family is diverse, multi-generational, and generously loving. On many accounts the communication style would be considered open and compassionate. I presume that, had I directed questions about sexual health to elders in my family, they would have been answered with the compassion that I continually enjoyed as a youth. Regardless, I did not consider that asking questions about sexual health was an option in the family. Rather, I felt that discussions of sexuality were disrespectful to my elders in an

unspoken way, and therefore I learned about sexual health from other sources. My parents did not approach sexual health communication in a direct manner, despite being offered support from formal education designed to influence our discussions. The parenting I received was not directed by a script or suggestion, but rather based on constant daily interactions, our environmental context, and the content of the interactions. I do not see fault on the part of my elders in choosing not to educate me using material from official sources. Rather, I wonder how they integrated the formal information into their own ideals for raising children, how language should be used between parents and youth, and hopes for providing good parenting. This narrative project is a part of my personal response to these reflections, designed to allow a space for dialogic reflection of the participants, while also working toward honouring the complexity of *not knowing* that exists between parents and youth.

Participants. As is typical for qualitative methods, I worked with a small number of participants that spoke of their individual and unique experiences (Creswell, 1998). Three individuals that are parenting youth between the ages of 13 and 20 were recruited to share their stories of communication about sexuality from the perspective of caregiver. An additional three individuals, aged 19 or 20, who have experienced pregnancy, were asked for their reflections on their experiences of learning about sexuality throughout their lives. These youth were asked to reflect on both their interactions with their parents, and also their predictions of how they will talk with their own children as they age into sexual maturity.

Initial recruitment efforts were attempted through local community venues (Appendix A), specifically through community events postings, local libraries, and social venues where families typically congregate (eg. sports centres). This first stage of recruitment did not result in any participants, therefore I expanded my recruitment efforts to include day-care programs

and after-school centres geared towards teens. This second stage of recruitment did not result in any participants. Leadership in both day-care and after-school programs suggested that lack of participants may be due to the timing, as my program of research began in July and school was out of session. Notably, two post-secondary education facilities that provide childcare for students indicated that none of their service-users fell into the 19 or 20 age range.

Challenges to recruitment became a topic of conversation in a community setting, at which point a community member indicated his knowledge of individuals that might wish to participate that fell within the eligibility guidelines. The next day, I received an email from an interested party. From that point, the parents of teens were recruited through word of mouth, reflecting snowball sampling. All parents of teens made contact with me about the study via email. All teens made initial contact by phone. An eligibility script was emailed or read to the participants (Appendix B) so that they would know what to expect from the study and whether they fulfilled the eligibility requirements. One participant, Vita, phoned after the eligibility screening to ask whether her partner, Wood, could also participate. I spoke with him over the phone and he agreed to the eligibility requirements and the focus of the study.

One participant who became aware of the study through snowball sampling was an individual that I had formerly worked with in a counselling context. This was concerning, as it would require me to sit in a different role with the individual- that of a researcher rather than a counsellor. I consulted with my clinical supervisor as to the ethics of working with this former client in a research context. Steps were taken to ensure that the former client was fully aware that participation in the study would not be akin to counselling: the participant was interviewed at the University, rather than in the home setting as was typical for other participants; additional time was spent discussing the process of the session, especially how

the session would differ from counselling participation; referral resources were discussed with the participant if she would require future counselling; and finally, she was asked during the interview how she felt her experience differed from others because we had a previous counselling relationship. The participant indicated that she felt the previous relationship helped, although it is important to note that her story may have been shared in a different manner than the other participants.

During this process of recruitment, I maintained a reflexive research journal detailing my notes and thoughts, as is customary for qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). My notes included discussions occurring before, during, and after interviews, as well as my notes as themes emerged during the analysis process. I have included some of my journaling throughout the thesis.

The participants. Zabrina is a parent of three children. Her daughter, Brenda, is 18. Her eldest son, Cale, is 16, and her son Daniel is 15. She shares parenting of her three children with Zane, the father of Cale and Daniel, and Zane's wife Abby.

Yovela is a mother of two daughters, Ayla, in her early 20s, and Yvonne, age 13, and two sons, Craig, age 19 and Noah age 16. She shares parenting with her husband, Yates. Yates lives in a different province part-time due to work obligations, and at the time of the interview Craig and Noah were staying with Yates. Ayla lives with her boyfriend in the same city as Yovela.

Xia is the mother of two daughters, Malinda, age 19 and Heidi, age 16. She lives with her husband, Lance.

Wood is 20 years old, and is the father of a six month old son. He also shares parenting of two step-daughters, Brigid, age five and Christa, age three, with his partner Vita. Vita is 20 years old. She is the mother of Brigid, age five, Christa, age three, and a six-month old son. She shares parenting with her partner, Wood.

Uma is 19 years old. She is the parent of Ellie, age three and Annie, eight months. She lives with Matthew, the father of Ellie and Annie.

Listening with an Open Heart

There are important points that an interviewer finds herself reflecting upon when working within the sensitive subjects of family and sexuality. It has been important for me to address the power differential inherent in research, particularly language ability that might have influenced how participants shared their story, and my intention behind choices that I have made during the emergence of this work.

Interviewing on the Border. Critical social theorists presume that there are many research studies that suppress alternative views of the world, and that this begins as the researcher sets the agenda of a research project (Bishop, 1994; Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). By choosing a narrative method, I took a step toward allowing participants to share their unique voice rather than fit into a category that has been formed by another (Bishop, 1994). I do not presume to suggest that I have abolished the unequal power that exists between researcher and participant, nor do I claim to be a completely objective interviewer. I am a member of the community where I conducted the research, and I have my own experiences with family and sexuality that influenced my responses to participant narratives. Using the metaphor of the Borderland, I consider myself as not simply a researcher, but rather

a person enmeshed in the community, exploring social justice as both a community member and a researcher. Anzaldúa (1987) suggests that researchers and participants exist on a border, are both responsible for translating experiences to the other and thus some level of power is held by both. I see myself sharing the Border with participants as we create new knowledge through dialogic reflection of story-telling.

[Journal Entry] I romanticize the Border as being an active, but comfortable place, but when I actually live in it, I realize I insulate myself from attempts to connect through using this language, my academic thoughts. Actually, this relationship is difficult and awkward for me, and I am always interested to reflect on how much power the community has in this! Who controls the Border? Not me, that's my feeling.

Listening with an open heart also requires acceptance of the contextual truth of participants. I would be remiss if I did not admit to my small 'inside' voice that questioned my participants at times, or noted inconsistencies in stories. However King (2003) and others note that my position is to be with the story-teller as they create and re-create their authentic life through the telling of stories (see also O'Dea, 2006).

Participant storying. Riessman (1993) notes that often the most natural way of introducing the idea of story-telling to a research participant is by providing a model.

I have no set questions to ask you, I just want you to tell me about your [life] as if it were a story with a beginning, a middle, and how things will look in the future...to get you started, why don't you tell me what your life was like before? (Riessman, 1993, pp. 54-55).

I used a similar introduction to the narrative interview. I presented this introduction first during the eligibility screening, and then began with this suggestion when opening with participants (Appendix C). Each participant had her or his own style of proceeding. There was no real consistency in the manner in which the stories unfolded except for in their subjective uniqueness.

My own role as the listener also deserves note. Attentiveness and comprehension of the listener are important to the amount of disclosure that occurs in a narrative interview. Alea & Buck (2003) note that when a listener is fully engaged with a story-teller, more elaboration of the story and more emotional content is shared. As the listener, I have participated in the construction of the participants' narratives, supporting the participants in engaging in reflection and making meaning of their story. I also potentially changed how stories emerged by maintaining conscious time-keeping, and orienting stories to relate to the research question. In this way, I may have changed emerging stories, rather than if they had proceeded unheeded.

I asked participants to trust me with sensitive information that could have real significance on both the participants and me. Meyer (2008) suggests that acknowledging how research influences the heart and spirit of the researcher and honours the connection between the work and the community is an important outcome of qualitative research. My awareness of the influence on my heart and spirit is brought out in my journaling.

My sense is that, during the interviews, parents of teens were quicker to respond directly to the research question related to sexual health, and felt more comfort in describing

how they talk and teach in their families. Youth took a more guarded approach, often exploring family relationships first before discussing any issues related to sexual health.

To further support the safety of the participants, I also included community resources available should they desire counselling services. I discussed these resources with the participant before beginning the interview, and again discussed the availability of counselling services at the close of the interview.

Drawing exercise. Part of my research included engaging participants in a drawing activity. At the end of each interview, I asked participant's to draw a picture of their family to allow the participants to express ideas outside of dialogue. A drawing activity appeals to other cognitive modalities outside of *voice*, which may improve the ability to reflect upon what is being discussed (Kalyuga, Chandler, & Sweller, 2000; Tindall-Ford, Chandler, & Sweller, 1997; see also Mayer & Sims, 1994). Drawing activities have been used to explore relationships to health and illness (Aita, Lydiatt, & Gilbert, 2010),

Guenette and Marshall (2009) suggest that sensitive-topic interviews are well-suited to non-dialogic activities to explore participant experiences. Asking participants to engage in an alternate reflective space through the use of drawing may help to ease the psychological impact of participating in a sensitive discussion. Drawing also relieves some of the pressure participants might experience at describing their family members, allowing instead for the family to be personified in the outside object of the drawing (Hogan, 1997).

Offering an exercise that is not simply based in language is also fitting for research grounded in critical social theory. By presenting participants the chance to create individual family drawings, I offered participants the space to create their own narrative, one that is not

completely framed by my interview questions or probes. Most participants enhanced their descriptions of physical and personality characteristics of family members and how that influenced the parent-youth relationships, as well as explored further how family members related to one-another, crucial components to this study. Outcomes of participants' drawing experience are presented in detail in Chapter Five.

Counsellor-researcher identity. The professional position in which I find myself most comfortable is that of counsellor. For the purpose of this research project, I found myself simultaneously acknowledging that natural self while allowing my researcher identity to lead my actions. In order to maintain clear boundaries in this area, I used a list of interview probes to assist my focus on the research question (Appendix C). I also took paper and pencil notes during the interview. These are two actions that I do not take in a counselling setting. Furthermore, having community counselling resources available for participants reinforced my role as a researcher, rather than counsellor.

Analysis

My aim in conducting the analysis has been to view the *whole* of the participant experience. Analysis of narrative involves integrating the individual human experience described during the interview process and expanding this experience into the social contexts within which they occur (Moen, 2006). I conducted a layered analysis that resulted in the themes presented here. The beginning of the layered process of analysis began with the interview process, as I journaled my experience and any ideas that stood out for me based on the stories told by the participant. The next layer of analysis was during the process of transcribing, where I also took note of main ideas that stood out for me, and began considering

where participant stories could be segmented into coherent sections, focusing on a beginning, middle, and future, or where participants developed characters in their family stories. The detailed transcripts were the main source of the thematic analysis, and also provided the content for the ghostwritten stories. Concept mapping provided an additional layer of analysis, where thoughts, key ideas, and main characters were sorted into categories that I interpreted as important for the participant. Ghostwriting of stories meant organizing the transcript details and concepts into coherent story sections, further highlighting main ideas and areas where I could situate the participant within their stories.

Interviewing. Frank (2000) notes that one of the strengths in narrative is the power of the listener to provide witness for the story-teller. The listener supports meaning-making for the story-teller by allowing the story to be heard. This description of the interviewing process provides a good fit for my theoretical worldview, in which research is meant to expand awareness and open a space where new reflections might emerge. Within the interview process, I collaborated with participants to help them communicate ideas about family and the relevance of their stories. I used reflexive questioning as a method to clarify aspects of the participants' narrative and explore meaning, and collaborated with the participants within the interview setting to reassure participants that they would be respectfully represented in the re-storying process (Gergen, 1999; Thomm, 1987).

[Journal Entry: Zabrina] "It's okay, I'm pretty open." When I checked in with her, this is what she said. Talking about sexuality means 'open'? She asked if the interview was about her kids or her sexuality. I suggested that I would be interested in hearing whatever story fit for her related to the question.

This journal sample provides an example of how the development of themes within participant stories began with the interview. Reflective journaling directly after the interview of my early thoughts and feelings about content and the process of the interview added details toward an expanding view of the participants that became a piece within the layered analysis.

Drawing activity. I included a drawing activity in the interview process, asking participants to illustrate a picture of their family. The addition of a drawing exercise to a narrative interview is intended to allow multiple expressions of the family, and support the participant in fully describing their story (Hogan, 1997). Drawing activities have been used by other researchers to explore health and illness (Aita, Lydiatt, & Gilbert, 2010), representations of community (Murray, Crummett, Stephens, & Flick, 2010), and expand narrative reflections where language barriers existed (Davis, 2010).

I did not conduct a secondary analysis of the drawing, although I did ask for participants to describe and discuss their drawing in the interview. Other researchers have noted that including art in narrative inquiry facilitates a deeper description of the narrative (Butler-Kisber, Allnutt, Fulini, Kronish, Markus, & Poldma, 2003; Nissimov-Nahum, 2009; Poldma & Stewart, 2004). This research supports these earlier discussions, as participants here deepened their descriptions of family members, relationships between and across family members, and taking an overall view of their family in relation to the elements of their story. Participant responses to the probes related to the drawings have been integrated into the participant stories, and also into the analysis. I have provided more detail on participant drawings in Chapter Five.

Transcribing. I transcribed the participants' stories shortly after the initial interview. Transcribing truly offered an opportunity to get inside the actual words of the participant, and was a major component to the development of concepts and themes throughout the analysis process. From the transcription, I conducted more journaling and process notes, adding emerging ideas to the layered analysis. I journaled both during and after the transcribing.

[Journal Entry: Xia] Sex gets mentioned under the same umbrella as drugs, alcohol, tattoos. Risk?

Journaling during transcribing and the process of transcribing itself proved to be the most useful piece to the development of the ghostwritten stories and also the emerging themes for the participants. The transcripts allowed me to begin categorizing the stories into character development and specific anecdotes that could be ordered into a beginning, middle, and future. I was also able to reflect back on the words of the participants in relation to early journaling that I had done.

[Journal Entry: Vita] Talking about pets-focus on story?

[Follow-up Journal Entry] Pets are part of her story! Not separate! Relates to relationship for her, think about how this could be.

After transcribing the interviews, I re-read ideas regarding theory and method, and also re-read the literature review that I presented in Chapter Two. I also reviewed my journals to consider my early ideas related to the content of the interviews. I then used a relatively simple "cut and paste" method of coding the individual transcripts. I first printed each individual transcription in its entirety, and cut paragraphs and sentences into pieces. I sorted all of the cut pieces, and organized them by story character or anecdote within the participant's

narrative across a table-top surface. This provided an actual paper map of the participant's individual narrative, and I was free to reorganize or rearrange pieces of participant narrative to condense anecdotes or sequences. From this paper map, I first journaled notes about what I was seeing visually, then began to create a list of broad words or ideas that came to me while reviewing the importance of the different characters and anecdotes presented within participants' stories.

[Journal Entry: Yovela] I just realized her cut-and-sort feels like a genogram.

Importance of relationship?

After creation of this paper map, I began moving sections into sequences intended to represent a beginning, middle, and future, to facilitate the re-storying, while also highlighting major events that the participant discussed. I labelled the events with broad titles, and added these titles to the list of main ideas. The main ideas gathered from the cutting and sorting of the transcripts became the content for the concept-mapping, which provided the next layer of analysis for developing themes.

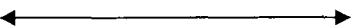
Concept mapping. A concept map is a tool which allows a researcher to represent, through diagramming, the essences of experience being discussed by participants, and how different ideas relate to one another. A concept map is a method that allows a researcher not only to hear certain elements of story, but also to represent links between ideas as presented by the participant. Concept mapping connects how the listener hears relationships between different elements within a storied experience, allowing the researcher to triangulate major elements and ideas in a story (Goodyear, Terence, Terence, Lichtenberg, & Wampold, 2005).

Concept mapping allows an illustration of the interaction between events that may occur naturally in story.

Concept mapping for this research became pivotal as a method of condensing key ideas, character representations, and the transcribed interviews into themes. With a list of main ideas developed from my journals, notes from the process, and categories of events from the participant transcripts, I created a paper map from cut strips of paper labelled with the list of individual participant ideas. The use of slips of paper on a table was useful in this part of the process, as I was able to easily move ideas around, expanding and condensing my interpretations of the listed concepts. My journal entries during this process highlight some of my difficulties.

[Journal Entry: Zabrina] Misplaced faith, does this fit? Stories from mom, church, ideas about preserving innocence, even her ideas about honesty seem to have let her down, and definitely influenced her relationships and her sexuality. Also, she still has ideas about love that she wants it to be for the rest of her life, so she hasn't given up that faith. Reactionary as a result?

When difficulties such as this arose, I looked back to the transcripts to support the broad ideas, and also the reflections in my journals. These sources provided reflection tools so that I could stay close to the narrative of the participant in the representation in the concept map. In the follow-up entry to the above notes regarding Zabrina's concept map, I have crossed out the word *reactionary*, and written in the margin:

[Follow up entry] Bi-  Directional!

This example of the process for Zabrina describes how the process continued to evolve, with concept mapping presenting more concise ideas that eventually developed into the within-participant themes.

Ghostwriting. Re-storying participant narratives provides a coherent beginning, middle, and end for the reader. Storied plots of “how” and “why,” along with descriptive characteristics integrate into a tale of an interesting life experience meant to touch the reader. Riessman (1993) suggests that a re-storied narrative includes elements such as orientation of the reader to the time and situation, ordering events in a sequence, including the significance of the event to the story-teller, and suggesting a resolution while bringing the teller back to present time. In order to orient the reader to the time and situation of the individual participant, I reflected upon how the participant had initially responded to the invitation to participate and the research question, using the participant transcripts to find words to provide an orienting sentence. I also reflected upon anything that stood out for me within the process of the interview that could help the reader to share my experience of the personality characteristics of the participant, giving a bit of a sense of the story-teller.

[Journal: Vita] Her response to the eligibility script: ‘Yeah, I’ll participate, I like stories’ ...[in the interview process] quickly set the stage for story, went directly to past without any probes. Like she was ready and she knew a good story starts from the beginning.

A difficulty in qualitative research is that of representing another’s words and experience completely. Rhodes (2000) describes the use of ghostwriting to represent experiences of others in a storied fashion, maintaining that the actual “ghost” in the story is

that of the researcher. The researcher is both a listener and an organizer of the participant's story, and in this way the researcher becomes a part of the story. This element of ghostwriting becomes particularly noteworthy when deciding on the significance of events. I attempted to stay within the original transcript as much as possible to describe the significance of the events for the participants and was fortunate that participants gave detailed and rich accounts so that I did not have to interpret anecdotes, except in relation to sequencing events in a logical order.

Reissman (1993) suggests that the resolution of a story is an important element in ghostwriting. Participants in this study were asked how they perceived the future might look, with most providing details of their future hopes and hopes for their families. The transcript detail from this interview probe provided much in terms of both resolving the story and bringing the story back to the present day. To conclude participant stories, I again looked to the notes that I had taken of my experience of them, supported by their own words from the transcripts, so that I could represent some of the characteristics that stood out for me during the interview process.

[Journal Entry: Uma] Challenges in her family for herself, but parenting is really important to her, above all things.

These journaled notes influenced my decision to close Uma's story with her words on how she feels about her children.

Ghostwriting is attempting to take the standpoint of the storyteller and accurately reflecting someone else's experience. It is impossible for a researcher to create an objective representation of another's experience (Frank, 2000). Hogan (1997) suggests that the

qualitative researcher works toward representing the participant with integrity, with her own words, and in a way that is readable to those outside of the academic community. My aim in this thesis has been to produce a storied experience of family life and sexuality communication through presenting ideas, characters, and important events shared by the participants.

Meta-themes. After the transcripts, concept maps, ghost-written stories, and individual participant themes were developed, the process of reflection on across-participant themes presented a new challenge. In a reflective discussion with my supervisor regarding the uniqueness of the participants' stories, she suggested that I imagine a bird travelling over the maps, drawings, and main ideas presented in participant responses, and any links that could be tied across the stories. I took her suggestion literally, and proceeded to lay out the paper concept maps for the six participants across a large surface, attempting to link ideas and create one large concept map related to family stories and sexual health education (Appendix E).

[Journal Entry] Sex is a responsibility- Learned with expectations attached.

[Journal Entry] Sexuality is embedded individually. Not a separate issue, really stuck into context.

[Journal Entry] Learning taken from family of origin → Different ways to be in relationship → Parenting/teaching/learning as a life-long process.

What emerged from this large concept mapping were my interpretations of connections across stories. These connections were key ideas or words that were highlighted in the links across concept maps. With each key idea that presented itself as a potential across-participant theme, I revisited the transcripts individually to confirm or disconfirm that

the theme was relevant across participant stories. This resulted in the meta-themes introduced in Chapter Five and detailed in Chapter Six.

Participant confirmation. Confirming the story with participants is a method of improving the credibility of the re-storying, and offering participants to add or change elements of their original tale. After ghostwriting the participants' interviews, I sent the stories to the participants that consented to follow-up and asked for their feedback. One participant did not want to be contacted for follow-up. Two participants that requested the stories be mailed to their homes were no longer living at the addresses that they indicated during the interview, which occurred two months prior to the mailing. The other three participants requested contact via email. At the time of this writing, only two of these participants, both parents of teens, acknowledged the re-storying. Feedback from one was simply to affirm that she felt the experience beneficial for her and that she trusted my judgment in the storying. The second participant that gave feedback asked that I would add characteristics of her child to the story as she felt that she did not focus enough on her daughter's positive qualities. These qualities are present in the final story presented in Chapter Four.

Moen (2006) notes that dilemmas of trust and respect occur if the participants do not believe in the interpretive capabilities of the researcher. My aim was not only to build that trust during the interview through respectful and caring listening, but also to collaborate with the participants in the final drafting of their stories. To protect the participant's anonymity, I gave each participant a pseudonym, and removed or altered all identifying information from the stories, such as places where the participants had lived and their professions. Participants were also given the option of conducting the interview in their home, at the university, or at a

downtown location easily accessible by public transportation. Four participants requested the interview be conducted in their homes, reasoning that they were parenting small children and that this would be much more feasible for childcare. One participant chose a downtown location. One participant was interviewed at the university due to our history in a counsellor-client relationship, as described in earlier paragraphs.

Being committed to anti-oppressive methods, I felt it necessary to offer a fair wage for participation in this research project, however offering money in exchange for research participation continues to be a contested issue as it raises concerns that participants were enticed (Creswell, 2008; Dickert & Grady, 1999). For this research, I asked participants why they wanted to join the study, with all indicating some level of interest in the subject matter. Some participants, however, noted that the money was also relevant. Creswell (2008) suggests that researchers ask themselves how we can fairly exchange with research participants, as they “give a great deal when they choose to participate...often revealing intimate details and experiences” (p.239). I feel that my decision to pay the participants a fair wage for participation was the right one for my theoretical worldview and also a generally accepted practice in research (see Dickert & Grady, 1999). I also have included the economic relevance of sexual health and family communication within this thesis, and suggest that this is an area that should be highlighted for future research endeavours.

Writing my own borders. As a researcher attempting to explore stories of others, an important aspect of this research has been to identify my own reactions to the participants and their stories. Disch (2006) suggests that we deepen “awareness of what we know about ourselves and others by exploring the Borderlands within ourselves...[leading] to greater awareness toward understanding and healing in this tough border space” (p. 124). I journaled

on my experiences with each participant both before and after the interview, and truly attempted an exploration of my attitudes even those that were semi-conscious, in order to “shrink the space between” (Disch, 2006, p. 129). My own borders have influenced the entire process of this project, and are in many ways apparent within the thematic mapping. My journal reflections throughout this thesis are intended to offer the reader the chance to integrate my own self-location with that of the story-tellers.

Soundness of the Work

Whereas quantitative methods focus on validity, reliability, and objectivity when discussing the rigor of research, qualitative methods look more toward a subjective understanding of an experience. Integrating information in order to *describe*, rather than define a phenomenon, is the goal of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008; Winter, 2000). Thus, qualitative researchers describe validity in research as being sound, rather than valid in objectivity. Describing validity in qualitative research utilizes establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Trochim, 2006). Dexter (2000) notes that qualitative methods are often more complicated than naturalistic methods, and thus require more detailed description.

Credibility. Credibility in qualitative research describes the level of belief the participants have in the description of the events by the researcher. This is considered one of the most important pieces of determining whether the results are trustworthy (Shenton, 2004; Trochim, 2006). One way of ensuring credibility is that the researcher has the background, qualifications, and experience within the field being studied that will allow the researcher a familiarity with the topics of the research. As I described in the sections of self-location and

counsellor-researcher identity, I have been working in the field of sexual health for a number of years. Furthermore, my training as a counsellor increases my ability to connect with participants and be open to their experience of the research topics. My experience developing trust and rapport facilitated openness with the study participants, further improving credibility.

Using methods and interview techniques that have been successful for other qualitative researchers is another factor adding to the credibility of this research project (Shenton, 2004). I used a narrative methodology, specifically that of story-telling, in order to gather participant descriptions of their experiences. Story-telling is an historical tradition in many cultures, and is now used often in both counselling and qualitative research to gain descriptive information from participants. Furthermore, story-telling is considered a culturally safe method of collecting information from participants, and when using critical methods is considered the most valued method of data collection (Battiste, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Meyer, 2008). Narrative methods have been used in previous research successfully both with similar demographics and to investigate sexuality (see Brown, 2006; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Thorne & McLean, 2003; Shoveller, et al., 2004; Ward, 2000). In addition, I clearly documented my methods, so that readers may gain insight about the conditions in which this type of project might allow for similar data collection under similar circumstances.

Data triangulation describes the use of multiple methods of data collection, allowing for layered interpretation of research results (Shenton, 2004). I have described in the previous pages how I have conducted a layered analysis, using a combination of journaling my own reflections, the audio recording of the interview, the transcription of the interview, the drawing produced by the participant, and the concept map that resulted from the ongoing analysis. I have also participated in ongoing discussions with a community sexual health

educator and my thesis supervisor so that they might also scrutinize the project and the analysis. Finally, I have been open and flexible with the project participants as their stories developed during the interview process, and sought feedback after the re-storying, requesting participant verification of the representation (Shenton, 2004).

By combining my experience within this field, using methods that have been successful for conducting this type of research, triangulating the data collection, and documenting these phenomenon, I have attempted to improve the credibility of my research. I ensured that I had a solid base from which to conduct the research, that I used tools and techniques that have been tested, and that my work was checked by others to account for my own limitations or misinterpretations.

Transferability. Qualitative research is designed to describe an individual's subjective experience, and therefore is not transferable to other populations. However, qualitative research that is well-documented is considered sound in that the research *design* can be duplicated with similar methods of data collection and analysis (Shenton, 2004). Providing a "thick description" of the research process allows readers of the project to decide how the research may be applied to other populations or participants (Shenton, 2004, p. 70). Soundness relative to transferability occurs through the detailed description of the research participants, including the methods and locations used to recruit participants, reflections on individuals that did not express interest in the study, and methods in which the data was collected. My reflections on the recruitment process and the individual participants have provided valuable information on the transferability of this type of project in a different setting, with different recruitment venues or cultural norms. By offering a clear outline of the

project design and an ongoing dialogue of the opportunities or setbacks experienced in my community throughout this chapter, I offer transferability of this research into other contexts.

Dependability. Dependability of a qualitative design describes the consistency of the research results within an ever-changing context. The world of both the participants and the researcher changes as research is conducted. Accounting for how this change occurs throughout the process provides documentation of dependability, increasing the soundness of a qualitative design (Key, 1997; Trochim, 2006). Dependability of a research program is based in a combination of factors, including a clear documentation and reflection upon how the research progresses, describing the intentions behind the research design and how this is reflected in the ongoing process (Shenton, 2004). As stated throughout this document, I have maintained field notes on data collection strategies, and have clearly outlined the intentions of the research design related to theory. I have also noted how the recruitment and analysis processes evolved as the research unfolded. These descriptions are offered as evidence toward a dependable program, improving the soundness of this research.

Confirmability. Confirmability describes the extent to which a research study effectively describes the perceptions of the researcher and the participants (Trochim, 2006). Qualitative research is confirmed through the use of triangulated methods, as described in previous pages. Self-location of the researcher and reflection upon researcher bias are other methods in which research may be evaluated as to whether the data is a result of the participants or reflecting the bias of the researcher. My reflexive process began with the design of the research, and ensuring that a small piece of my own story was included in the introductory sections, included here in previous paragraphs. I also located myself with my participants when I introduced the study to them in the eligibility interview, being clear about

my educational and professional history, and my goals for storying their interviews that would ultimately result in completion of graduate studies. I consider this self-location to be external, so that readers and participants may identify elements of my own intentions within the study (see Creswell, 2008). Ongoing internal reflexivity occurred within my journaling process, some of those entries which I have included, especially those related to my ideas about the border-spaces. The reflexive process also helped me to explore potential weaknesses in the research design, such as my difficulties with initial recruitment efforts. I also continually evaluated my early expectations of the research, and my experience adapting to the needs of the participants to move toward an accurate description of their experiences of sexual health and family. I have included more detail on the outcomes of these thoughts and reflections in Chapter Six. Part of my work toward confirmability included reviewing research from other theoretical models that differed from the findings of this study. I have explored some of these points in Chapter Six. I have also continued to review social, political and academic initiatives related to sexual health and family communication, integrating that knowledge into this project during the writing process, to maintain a confirm research topic, where my perceptions and biases related to the research question and the thematic outcomes are transparent (Shenton, 2004).

Summary of Chapter Three

I have shaped a narrative inquiry to highlight my commitment to social change that intertwines my curiosity on the lived experience of families and my desire to be a better practitioner. My own objectives, and the research question exploring how family communication influences sexual health education, are well-suited to qualitative methods, specifically narrative story-telling, through lenses of critical social theory and social

constructionism. Meyer (2008) posits “Knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now (p. 221). In Chapter Four, I present to you the stories, with the hope that you, the reader, feel closer to the stories and experiences of the participants and encouraged to reflect on your own context and consciousness of sexual health.

Chapter Four- The Stories

Chapter four contains the ghostwritten stories of the individuals who took part in this thesis study. The stories are presented here in the order that they were shared with me. The first three women are parenting teens and the final three participants are teen and young adult parents. Each story belongs to the participant; I have assumed the role of ghostwriter and therefore the stories are written in first-person. The participant's family drawing follows his or her story.

Lopez (1998) suggests that stories shared are to be cared for, and with time we learn to pass them on as situations arise. With gratitude and humility I pass these stories on to you; perhaps you might feel inclined to pass them on as well.

Zabrina

My parents were hippies, they had an open marriage and they were, you know, doing what hippies do, like smoking pot and stuff like that. They always cared about each other and respected each other really well, but my mom finally realized that the open marriage was really doing her in and so my mom and dad split up when I was five, and they got divorced when I was eight. My mom moved my sister and I here to the Central Interior and my dad stayed in the city where he lived, about ten hours from here.

My dad and I have a completely different relationship than my mom and I do. My mom coached us to pray for our dad that he would get saved and that he would come home. With the praying, she was teaching us faith, and I think that's the cause of my issues with men is I had faith that my dad would come home and he never did. I realize that's where a lot of my issues around needing men come from.

After the divorce, my mom kept us. My mother was a Christian, and she went back to Christianity. She started teaching Sunday school and returning to what she grew up with. She took us to Sunday school and church and we were very involved. My mom led church events and sometimes would play music there, and that was really good. It was a really good environment, and a good musical environment always which is really nice. Then we switched to another church that was more charismatic, which was more exciting. When you're 11 or 12 years old you don't just want to go and sit in service with hymns. The charismatic church, they had a better worship team and they had the cool Christian music.

I also went to the Christian school. And I'm not talking Catholic school where you have a religion class, I'm talking Christian, where at the bottom of your Socials page there's a scripture that you have to have memorized by the time you're done that book. Every month there's a passage, a scripture that you have to have memorized in order to have certain privileges. It's a crappy school system. It was bad, but I understand as Christian parents it was all they had. You know, they did their best, what they thought was best for us at that time.

The church was such a huge part of our life. Like you didn't just go to church and be a Christian, it was an all-encompassing kind of Christianity. It wasn't just, 'yeah I go to church'. For me, if I said "Shit!" I would ask God to forgive me immediately. I was taught that it was who you were. It was a lifestyle, not just a small part of you. A lot of people go to church and it is kind of over here on the side, just one small part of their life and then the rest of their life happens. That wasn't how I went to church. It was *who you were*.

When I was 19, as a show of faith as a Christian that I would not have sex, my parents made me go off the pill. Within the month I was pregnant. You know and that is, it was just so stupid. I mean I would never go back and erase my daughter's life because she is amazing

and I'm really glad that I have her in my life. But getting pregnant at 19 brought all my hopes and dreams to a grinding halt. I know one young lady right now who is pregnant and she is 15. She is wonderful, and I am sorry, but her future career, consider it over. You know, she is 15; she has to make responsible choices now. She'll be working at the 7-11, if they'll keep her. But it's just so hard to see that. The reason I'm not further in my career is I had my children first.

I had stopped going to church when I was out of high school, but then when I got pregnant I was so scared I just went back to what I know. And you know I blame it all on Bing Crosby and that song, Faith of Our Fathers. It was Christmastime, I was listening to it and I was like, that's what I need to do. I didn't know what to do and I was wanting to have some morals to show my children, and I was just needing to go back to familiarity. I was thinking, I'm having this baby, and at the time I thought I was going to be alone. So I went back to the church I knew, and I blame it all on Bing Crosby.

A month later Zane came into my life and I thought that was a Godsend. Zane was a bushman like my dad had been and I knew him from earlier in my life, so we got married, then there was very fast disillusionment. But at the same time when you're a Christian, you stay married. When I was a teen we were told from the church that you don't date, you find the person you're predestined to marry and you marry them. And you don't have sex until you're married, you know. It was very much about this predestined thing, which is totally fucked up. I feel like they really did us wrong by putting that on us. Like I understand the good points of chastity, I understand that. But also people want to have sex, like it's a very natural human thing. There's so many '*the ones*' out there that you can have that connection with.

The other part was I consider myself for the most part to be bisexual and at the time I had to deny it. I went to this church and so I had to deny another part of myself. It was bad. My sexuality and my sex life, my moral life, I feel like I am now taking a big swing from totally, you know, just suppressed, to being way on the other side of things, and things have to come back to the middle area. I'm feeling like I'm coming back to the middle now, with all these rules for myself because of being in the church.

So this is where I was, in my 20s, when I started to feel like I just... came *awake*. When I was about 26, I felt like I woke up and said 'Oh! This is who I am. And this is not the life I wanted.' And that's when I started to realize the church was not for me. And then I started wanting to leave the marriage to Zane, and it took five years for me to get to the point where I felt strong enough to leave. This involved an affair with an older man who really encouraged me to be me. And it also took going to college. When I started not needing that church network anymore was when I started having the other networks in college. That was what helped me to have other supports, to help me have the strength to leave my husband and that life. And now I have a lot of networks even though I am not as involved in them, there's a great bunch of people in my town.

There was an authoritarian way that I was with the kids in those early years, because that's the way my ex-husband was, and that's the way the church was. It was very authoritarian, and it was hard for me to have a kind of respect or whatever you'd call it for the kids. I actually hit a point with my kids where I realized that I wasn't giving them respect. When I left their dad I wrote them a letter and I apologized for trying to fit them into a mould when I was just realizing I didn't fit into that mould. Why was I trying to do that to them? I don't know where the letter is now. I never gave it to them, but I think it is still in my

nightstand. My purpose from then forward was to encourage the kids to be who they are as individuals rather than put them into the idea of what I thought they should be. That was a real revelation time for me. I mean, it was just realizing that I didn't want to go to church anymore, that I really wanted to be who I am, and finding a different basis for the morals and everything. I'm very social so church was my social life. I taught church classes, I was a leader, I went on mission trips. It was who I was, but at the same time it was who I was trying to be. And so I thought I must feel something when we're doing this worship because everyone else is feeling something. So I'll work really hard to feel something. So I had to work really, really hard at it and meanwhile I was feeling all these guilt feelings for being a human, for wanting to have sex and being bisexual. And I just started to realize I'm not going to deny my humanity anymore. But it was so hard because you know that time in my life, that was the community that I knew when I was a young mom.

My mom, I think she still wishes that I would return to Christianity, but she's reached a point where she loves me and just accepts it. And we have great conversations based around what we do have in common and I respect her faith. When she says grace, I bow my head when we have lunch or whatever. She knows it's not my belief system, it's hers.

I know my mom did things that she wasn't proud of and that she felt like were mistakes, but she didn't tell me about it even though we had a lot of conversations. I mean some of the things that I found out later about my parents, I thought, 'Well if I had known that I wouldn't have felt that you were such a fuddy duddy'. I just wish my mom would have let me see that. I've asked my mom questions like that and she said, "Oh, it just didn't seem right." Okay, fair enough, I guess, but it would have given me another perspective. Now I

think she just really wanted to be the good Christian mom and she couldn't have that humanity side too.

I'm a firm believer of honesty no matter who you are or where you are in your life. I know not everyone does it this way. And some people think well, wow, if you let your daughter go on the pill then she's just going to go have sex. Well maybe she is anyway and wouldn't you rather be safe? Wouldn't you rather at least know that she isn't going to get pregnant? Because it just changes your life. One thing that Zane and I agreed on with the kids was this kind of honesty.

I ended up telling Brenda, my daughter, about sex at a fairly young age. I realized it was time to tell her she had a different father from her brothers. I think she was eight, and I had already told her that she had a different father, but it got to the point where she was asking me questions. She asked me how babies got out, and I thought, what is it she is asking me here. And so I said, "Well the baby grows in the mommy's tummy." She goes "Oh I know, I know, but how do they get *out*?" So I explained the delivery to her and she was kind of horrified. I wondered if I should tell her the rest at that point, but she didn't ask how they got *in*, so I decided I would wait until she asks how they got *in*. We reached a point when she did and we were alone in the car, and I think I was driving her to dance class. That was good because we were actually alone. I have three kids; they are close and they are always together. It is very rare that I would have time alone with one of my children, especially at that age. So she was asking me how people got pregnant, how the baby got in there in the first place. I started explaining to her about the man and the sperm. She asked, "How does it get in there?" And I'm laughing then, and it seems so funny now, you know, she started to laugh. She started to laugh so hard, I couldn't believe how hard, she had tears running down her face. She says,

“Oh my goodness, now I’m thinking that everyone does this.” I said, “Well honey, for the most part they do.” She cracked up and she said, “Now I’m thinking that you’ve done this!” I’m like, “Yes, Brenda,” and laughing. And she just laughed so hard. So I said, “I can’t believe you’re taking it like this,” and her response was “Did you think I’d take it seriously?” It was really cute, it was great, and now I laugh when I remember this story.

I ended up telling her brothers shortly after that just because the kids have conversations between themselves, and it might turn into ‘I know something you don’t know.’ It just sort of bubbled out from there. I told both the boys at once and they were quite young. I think Daniel, my son, was only six, and he is the youngest. So Brenda was eight and they are all right in a row: Daniel, six; Cale, seven, Brenda, eight. I remember Daniel said “I’m going to tell all my friends about this,” and I said “Oh, no you won’t.” And he said, “Oh, man, I really wanted to tell Eddie!, who was one of his neighbourhood friends. It was very cute.

You know, I just tried to explain it and to talk about it with them. I told them, you know, yes this happens, you put it inside. But I didn’t really go into detail. When my mom told me she kind of grossed me out. She was like, “Oh, it’s fun!” and I was like, it doesn’t sound like fun. I remember how I felt when my mom told me and I was trying to keep it a little minimalist for my kids. But of course, as they got older they started to realize that people do have fun having sex.

After Zane and I split up I started dating. They had an idea that I went out with men but they didn’t really know the details of what happened, and I didn’t really introduce anyone into their lives until I started dating just one person. Well, I’ve always been kind of free. I mean, I have sex with people I don’t love and I think they always kind of knew that. And they also know that there’s sometimes that it means more.

One night, and this was not too long ago, I brought my date home and I forgot my daughter was home and she heard us in my bedroom. And the next morning was like, “Oh my God, Mom.” What I thought was an interesting reaction was that she said, “Okay, Mom, I’m really happy for you, but you guys were really loud last night.” And I laugh when I tell you this, but I told her “Oh, my gosh I’m so sorry. I forgot you were here. I didn’t know you were awake.” You know. But we have always been honest with each other. And they have always talked to me about their experiences with relationships.

There was one point though when my daughter was starting to talk a lot about boys. The boys were always having girlfriends but Brenda is very conservative, so boyfriends, not so much. But there reached a point when she started seeing boys, and there were guys she was interested in. Well I bought a box of condoms and I brought them home and gave a condom to each of the kids. Daniel just giggled. Cale took his as a matter of course and was like, “Oh, cool.” Brenda could hardly touch it, she was just horrified. So they all had different reactions, but Brenda was just like, “Oh, no.” But I saw there was a boy she was spending time with and I could see there was the pre-flirtation that was leading up to something, and that they were going to start dating. I said to her, “Okay, I think you should go on the pill.” And she was perfectly okay with that. So even though Brenda has never had sex, she has been on the pill for a year and a half now, just because it’s a precaution. Sometimes she gets really irritated because she’s taking the pill and not getting to have any fun to go with it, but she is going to University next year so she’ll be fine. Brenda is very aware of being cautious, about having kids. She said, “I realize my brain is not fully working as an adult until I am about 26. So I’ll get married after 26. I won’t make any decisions about kids before then.” She’s very reasonable.

There was a point when I asked Cale if he was having sex. He wasn't telling me very much about anything, so I asked him and he said no. He actually told me something I found really fascinating: I'm not ready to have sex. And I said, "Oh, okay. That's interesting." He said that to most people sex is just sex but to him it's a commitment and he's not ready. I was floored because he was a 15-year-old! I was just, wow. I was really impressed with that. I think that he pretty much came up with that idea on his own. I mean I honestly don't know where he came up with that idea. Maybe that was something that his dad said to him, because I don't remember ever having a conversation like that. Cale is a little more emotional, so we'll see what happens with him, but he takes responsibility very seriously. He is a lot like his dad in that way, you know, you have to provide for a family if you are going to be living in the world. Zane has instilled that hardworking ethic into the kids for sure, which is really good.

Cale had a hard time when I started to live with my boyfriend, Yuma. He reacted when Yuma and I got together with the whole, "You're not my dad" kind of thing. And I think there was some resentment of Yuma.

It took Yuma a few weeks to come around to the idea of meeting the kids but he did, eventually. There was this whole incident the first time he spent the night at our place. The kids were so suspicious that he was there, so Daniel came to my door and knocked. And I said, "Well, what would you like," and he said, "I need some Q-tips." So he went into my ensuite, got the Q-tips, and went back to the living room! I came out and the boys were sitting on the couch, you know, looking sheepish, watching TV. And I said, "Are you done with the Q-tips?" "Yeah." "Well, what did you need them for?" "Nothing." Then they started laughing, and we all laughed a lot. You know, they kind of knew that Yuma and I were in bed together

but they just wanted to check. Yuma and I ended up moving in together and were in a committed relationship, but I had the affair and we broke up.

I had such a good relationship with Yuma, and I thought that we worked well together. We had a good friendship and a good partnership, but our sex life was crap, so I thought the wise decision was staying with him, but for the last 2-1/2 years of that relationship I was having an affair with a younger man. I thought that rather than talking about it, rather than keep on digging and perhaps losing the good parts of the relationship, I thought it was better to have an affair. But the younger man and I fell deeply in love and meanwhile I am still in love with Yuma and living with Yuma. I love too much, that's the problem. And I realize that I very rarely can have sex without caring about somebody, so I give pieces of my soul all over the place, and then I'm spread so thin and feeling so much emotion, and those are things that I think are unhealthy for me. This last affair that I had also affected my children. My kids see how it affects me because I talk to them about that. I mean there came a point when I had to tell them about my affair, and well, the kids were really hurt. Daniel, my youngest, he was a little bit affected, but he said, "Mom, this affair doesn't make me feel very good but it's your life and they are your choices." Just, well I don't like it but I love my mom. But Cale, he really was just really disappointed in me. It wasn't just because I had an affair while I was living with Yuma, but his dad also told him about the affairs that I had when I was with his dad. Cale kind of went, "Nobody should do that," and he didn't talk to me for six months.

Cale had a girl cheat on him before so he really took the affairs to heart. And even though Zane and Yuma and I let everything go under the bridge, he chose to take that personally. He actually told me I was manipulative and manipulating everyone around me, and he didn't talk to me for six months. I didn't think Cale and I would ever have a

relationship again. People kept saying, oh he'll come around. But they hadn't seen the way he was. He wouldn't look at me. On my birthday I went over to Zane's to drop off Daniel, and Cale hid with his head behind a planter so he wouldn't have to look at me. I left the house and I just bawled, because I was thinking is he ever going to come around? But he needed time. He needed his own time and his own thought process. People would ask Yuma and I, "What is his reason for hating you?" And Yuma would say, "Where Cale is concerned, there is no reason," because he really was unreasonable.

Cale's gotten a lot more reasonable and open now, and that's a maturity thing. There was a whole big thing where Cale asked Yuma and I to go up to Zane's after we had broken up and he said that he wanted to apologize for the way he had acted. My aunt had just recently passed away, and I think that was a real mortality wake up call for Cale. He realized that life was short and he needed to make amends and he just wanted to be part of my life again. He told me that he knew he needed to respect me in spite of decisions I had made. So he didn't talk to me for six months, and then he had come to a realization that, you know, people make mistakes but you don't stop loving them.

Daniel, my other son, he's the baby. And you know what, he's always been...*green*. When you have a boy and a girl, the girl gets everything pink or purple, and the boy gets blue or whatever, so when Daniel came around, we've always given him the green ones, you know. And it's him, he's very peaceful and he's very gentle. Mellow. I think he's very green. Daniel is very smiley and easy to get along with. And he always had a great sense of humour, highly elevated above his age. When he was little, he would make jokes or I would make jokes for my own benefit, and he would crack right up, while Brenda and Cale would just look on. Daniel doesn't say a lot of things. He's not a talker, so when he says something it's

usually something that hits home. Daniel said to me, “I don’t like seeing your bedroom door and wondering whose shoes are outside it.” And that’s when I was like, okay, I can’t bring home any more random dates around the kids. I mean I shouldn’t have sex with randoms anyway because it’s destructive to myself. There is the one thing I feel like I am not winning the battle with the kids about, and that is Daniel is so homophobic. It is ridiculous because I have tons of gay friends, most of them he knows and he loves. I can only guess that those ideas come from their dad because Zane is very much a dirt bike, snowmobile, redneck type of guy. And so he’ll make fun of gay people, but that’s not how I’ve tried to raise them. Often when Daniel brings it up it’s just me and him. And he’ll say something like, “Mom, why do you like Will and Graceⁱ? I hate it, it’s gay.” And I say, “I happen to like gay people.” And he will say something like, “Oh, is that why you hang out with your friend Michael?” And in the meantime, Michael is the guy I was having an affair with. I said, “Daniel, Michael’s not gay.” And he says, “Really?” Yeah, we know lots of gay people, he just doesn’t realize it. And he has a funny sense of who is gay, too. Like sometimes the kids will guess that someone is gay and they’re not. I don’t know, just the way they carry themselves or something. So I feel like I am winning a lot of battles with the kids about their sexuality, but that one maybe not so much.

They are pretty healthy kids emotionally, I think. More so than I ever have been, but I think I’m getting there. I think seeing my mistakes have really influenced the kids’ sex lives. Of course each one of them is individual and has a different situation. But I am hoping that seeing the ways I may not have made the best decisions is helping them to make better ones. I can only hope that’s what is going to happen, that they are going to learn from my mistakes instead of repeating them.

The kids sure value the time when it's just the three of them together. They really love having sibling time. They are really, really tight, they really love each other. They are practically the same age, really, and so they've done everything together all their lives. When Cale and I had the falling out and he was living with Zane, they went to two different schools, and they really missed each other. Like that was the most heartbreaking thing for them. They really missed having that time with the three of them. Yeah, they're really close, and really protective of each other. And I think they talk about relationships with each other, especially when it's just two of them. When it's just Brenda and Cale, or just Cale and Daniel, that seems to be the times when they talk and come back with a different attitude. And I laugh, it is usually about ganging up on me, saying, "Well, we're not sure we like this."

Sometimes I am really glad Brenda is going to school and moving out of town because I feel ganged up on. My daughter is 5'9" or 5'10", and Cale and Daniel are both over six foot. And they do kind of gang up on me and make fun a little bit. I've noticed that different attitude sometimes more than others. But it kind of makes me check myself, too, like if they're not happy that I'm going out again, maybe I should stay home. They need some mommy time. Sometimes it's a matter of if they've discussed it and decided mom's been away every night this week, and they say, "Stay home, damn it, don't you want to hang out with us?" So you have to kind of take that into account.

I have started dating again but I have to be careful about how I do that, because I don't want to slip back into patterns I was doing before, like having random shoes by the door, or taken that dramatic swing and ending relationships. It is sort of like this freedom sort of a thing. But at the same time, what I am realizing now is that I can't confuse freedom with being self-destructive. I have this pattern of affairs, and this is what I mean by mistakes.

Instead of dealing with things with my partner in a head-on matter, the way I have tended to deal with it is by running to someone else on the side. Those are things I do not want to do anymore. It's so hurtful, and such an emotional turmoil for everyone concerned, because I always end up feeling more than I intended to.

I have chosen to have a temporary relationship with a young man because I know he is leaving at the end of the summer. He is really great to hang out with and it's great. He has met two of my children now, and that is a little weird because he is only a couple of years older than my daughter. Brenda said, "Great, Mom, so you're dating someone my age again. Nice." And I said that the reasons are it's great, he's intelligent, he's leaving, and I need somebody to hang out with. I don't want to sit around and weep about my break-ups anymore. I just can't do it anymore, it's hurting me.

So this young man, Sal, met two of my children. And my son tried to have a total pissing match with this guy when he first met him. Cale came down in his underwear and was just looking at Sal like I don't know. So Sal says, "I believe this is a display of male dominance," and just totally called it what it is, laughing. And I said, "Cale, if you're trying to prove something I believe Sal's wearing underwear too!" But Cale was all tongue-in-cheek, that's how he dealt with it, kind of challenging and trying to make Sal uncomfortable. The fact that Sal didn't go for it went a long way. This was more in good humour, and later I said something to Cale about how Sal would be around the house again. Cale said, "Oh, shit, I'll have to see him again? I thought that was someone I'm never going to have to see again." And I was just laughing. I mean, Cale mooned him and everything, saying, "Sal, do you think my ass is too hairy?" It was really bad. Cale's stepmom was there when this happened, and she said, "Cale, why don't you just go around and pee on everything." I mean we were all

calling him on it, it was priceless. I am really glad Sal handled it the way he did, because it could have been worse. But I told Cale, "I already told you I decided not to have random people around anymore." The only reason I brought him around to meet them is I planned on having him around more often. So that was funny, I never really experienced that with the kids before.

Cale, you know, he is the oldest boy, so he just has a different reaction. He feels like he needs to protect me. And I did actually say to him that if I come home and I am really drunk you have my permission to kick the person out. I gave him my permission to do that. Because there was an incident when Cale was there and didn't know what was happening, but I had blacked out and I would never have made that decision. Afterwards I said, if there's someone around and I look like I'm not with it, you can get rid of them. So he does have that protectiveness with him. He is at a funny age, that age where he's almost a man. So he's sort of like, I'm the man of the house but I'm still a kid. A confusion age.

Their dad and I have said that we will do our best to influence them, but not to lay down the law about things that are personal. Their bodies belong to them. If they want to get a tattoo, that's up to them. But we'll try to talk them out of it first when they're really young, you know? But I've always said to them, when it comes right down to it you make the choices for your life, and I make the choices for mine because we are not the same person. You may have come out of me, but you make your own choices. I try to respect them. Sometimes that is hard when they are beings who came out of you.

I try to hold that and to encourage them. Sometimes I screw that up, and I always tell them that, just remember I am a person and I sometimes make mistakes. There have been a few instances where I've apologized for ways I've reacted to things. I know people who think

that it is a bad idea to apologize to your kids, and that is going back on what you said. But they need to know that it's okay to make mistakes as an authority. It is okay to say I screwed up, I'm sorry.

I have been rather promiscuous, and that really puts a deterrent on them. It's made them really cautious and they're quite a bit smarter than their mother, which I think is great. I mean, I'm sorry I had to be the bad example, but I was also very open about telling them times when I made mistakes. It was only just this year that I realized how my mistakes were affecting them. But unfortunately, parenting doesn't come with a manual. You just do your best for your kids and hope that they become the best that they can.

I think some families are in similar situations as ours. I have some friends that raise their kids the same way. You tend to stick with people with like minds anyway. But I have other people in my life that maybe I haven't chosen to have as friends, but have come into my life in other ways who are a lot less likely to treat their kids like I do. I know a lady who has kids that are the same age as mine and will not let her daughter go on the pill, even though she's had a boyfriend for a couple of years. My godmother was one of those moms, too. She really wanted to preserve the innocence of her girls as long as she could. I lived with her in the States, and her kids were four and six when I was living down there. I was 18, and I was in this crazy wild teenager kind of life: red lipstick, dyed black hair. And she was just wanting to protect her kids, let's just maintain sweetness, maintain that innocence in their daughters. And that's just playing with fire, you know? I see that you want to think your daughter is innocent, but you know what? She is 16 years old and she is going to do what she is going to do. Don't be blind about it. I see some parents like that, and like I say, there's no manual. I also laugh at myself because I've noticed that whatever I'm doing with my children

at this point in my life I feel like it's the best way and everyone should want to do it. I laugh, but when I was homeschooling my children, I said well why aren't you homeschooling, it's the obvious choice? And then I sent them to the Christian school and I said to them, why are you still homeschooling? It is funny. Then when I sent them to public school I said, oh, your poor kid is still at Christian school? And it's the same, you know, I tend to think being open with my kids is the best but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's the best for everyone.

We have a big family, and I think for us the extended family has become normal. It's important for me to help my children realize that many people have this type of family. It's not so rare, we're not dysfunctional. Or if we are dysfunctional, everyone is! And in fact, the less dysfunctional a family tends to look, the more they are, and they are just hiding it which makes them more fucked up than the rest of us, so I try to teach them to be accepting the abnormality of our family relationships. I like it.

My kids are really fortunate. Brenda says she's got five and a half parents. She's got her biological father who she says is more like the fun uncle that pays for stuff like phones and things like that but he loves her. Then there's Zane, the dad who raised her, and he is still very much a part of the family. He actually told me not too long ago that he never stopped loving me, and he was sorry that I felt unloved. I told him that it wasn't his fault, that it was all inside me. Then there's Yuma, who was a stepdad to her. The kids respect what Yuma did with them in the time that we were together because he did a lot for them. They also have a little brother, a two and a half year old. He is the son of Abby, their stepmom, and Zane. They have a good relationship with the child and he just loves the kids. I mean he's kind of a naughty little guy and very headstrong and so they kind of laugh at him, but yeah, they really love him.

Abby, their stepmom, she is so important. If it weren't for her, I would probably never speak to Zane. Abby is really great, she is the best step mom that I could ask for, for my kids. I've told her that, too. She has treated them like they're hers. They feel like they can talk to her, so they have that person who is an adult but not a parent that they can talk to. She's got a lot of wisdom and I absolutely appreciate her parenting. Abby and I have had hour-long conversations. She is a great person to have in their lives.

And my parents, and stepparents, they are just really good and reasonable people. When I got married to Zane, I had my mom and my step-dad and my dad and my step-mom all sit at the same table. They were all nice to each other. My stepmom cut my mom's hair for years. My dad and step-mom aren't together now, but my step-mom cut my mom's hair even after my dad and her split up.

I feel like I was leaving my parents out of the mix with this talk and the drawing, but that gets so complicated. There's my dad and step-mom who he is no longer with, and now he's engaged to a girl who's younger than me, which is great, he's happy. All those relationships are really important, so I felt like I was neglecting them by not including them in the discussion and the drawing, but at the same time I had a time limit. My step-mom was there when I was a teenager, and that is a really formative part of life. And even my dad's relationship with his later girlfriend brought a lot into our lives because she had kids that were our age. She really wanted to be with my dad and she loved being a part of our family. And she still talks to my grandparents. So I would have a hard time incorporating my dad without his girlfriend.

When I was in high school I had one of those stickers that said 'Why be normal?' and I've always lived by that. I think that it's cool to have kind of a unique family situation. I

think that it's a lot better than living in a way that you're miserable just because it looks like it's normal. It is a real important thing for me, being true to yourself and being honest.

And that's really who we are. Cale and I, we come head to head, we are too much alike. Cale has always seen deeper emotionally. If I am upset and I am trying to hide it from them, Cale will come up and go, "Well, what's going on, Mom." You know, he is very perceptive in that way and so insightful for a 17-year-old boy. Daniel sometimes works for me, very well. He has never had a problem respecting me, whereas Cale has struggled with that. And he's okay with that, you know. And Brenda, she is one of my very, very best friends. She probably knows me better than she would like to.

In the future, I believe that my children will continue to talk with me in the same ways that they do now. They tell me. When my youngest lost his virginity, the first thing he did was told me all about it. And I can see that continuing. Brenda doesn't want to talk to me very much right now, but that's just because she is dying for independence. She still talks to me quite a bit but I think when she leaves home for school, we will have a better relationship. I mean our relationship is pretty good, but she is just "Let me out of here" right now. And Cale, if I ask he tells me, and I can see that continuing for us.

I have a feeling that as a parent, Brenda, out of anyone, would be more likely to try to preserve the innocence of her children longer. I've seen others do that, when people have been raised in a very open home environment they just want to leave them little pretty fairy princesses, and let them live in that longer. I think that I can see Brenda wanting to shelter her kids a little more if she wants to have children. But often she says she might not want to have children, or may choose to adopt. She's got a good head on her shoulders. She thinks a

lot about the state of the world and the environment and about planning her life. She's a smart girl.

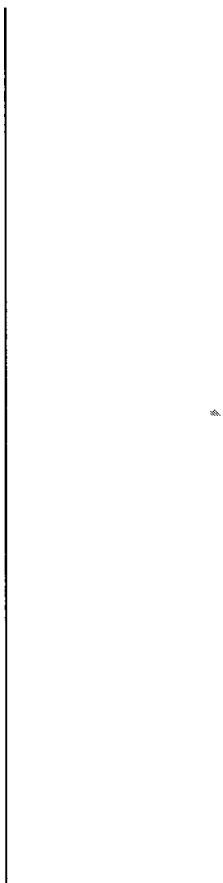
Daniel I would still consider quite young, he is 15. But he knows that having children is a commitment and wants to make sure that doesn't happen, so he's very conscientious and always sure about having protection.

My future, I'm not ready for anything serious and I need to choose selectively. The way I've managed to deal with so many of my issues already is to talk a lot. I've had two counselling sessions, but even the first one I've already made so much headway. I also talk a lot to my friends, and they give me their feedback and I chew on that. That's how I deal with it, along with different kinds of art.

It's funny, I talk so much about being honest but I've had all these affairs. I'm trying to break that. I am trying to make sure that I don't repeat those patterns. The next time I'm in a love relationship I want it to last the rest of my life. I am not getting any younger and I don't want to grow old alone. But right now I'm just not emotionally ready for that. I know that. And I know myself, I do. I'm just not prepared to give somebody that kind of a commitment. And I won't do it unless I feel it for real, and it has to be the right person. So right now, it's just me and my babies.

I found the process of telling this story, and reading it after, to be healing. I am in counselling and I think they kind of go together, this story of my family, and my own healing process. I am amazed at how many words I have to sort through.

Illustration 1 Zabrina's Family Drawing



Yovela

I love drawing. I chose kind of boring colours, but oh my God, I love drawing. In my picture, I drew Yates first because he's the man. He's supposed to be the "man of the house," the provider, the one to make you feel safe. The anchor. He is supposed to be the anchor, but that's me in the drawing right beside him as the *actual* anchor. I was going to draw a heart on my chest for Yates and me, but I changed my mind and I drew a shirt instead.

Yates and I are like night and day. It's just really weird. I'm involved in the community with sports and games, and I'm totally out there all the time. When the kids had sports, I was totally involved, totally the team mom kind of thing. And Yates: never. Well, maybe he umpired once. You know, I'm not one to sit in front of the TV and watch movies all night long. I'll be snoring halfway through the second movie! Yates doesn't understand that. I am so much on the go all the time, when I sit to watch TV my whole body starts to relax. And what do you do when you start to relax? You fall asleep. Yates gives me a hard time about that when he comes to town. He is living in another province right now for work, and when he comes to town I have him constantly going. He's saying, "Oh God, can we just sit down?" and I'm going, "We need to go! We need to go here, there, we got to keep going." And he can't handle that kind of run around. He's very low-keyed that way. I am very high-strung and get involved in everything.

I did that, I was a starter and I got myself involved. I'm glad that I got to be such a big part of my kids' life. That was one of my goals and I accomplished that, not to be necessarily better than what my mom was, but I wanted to make sure that my kids knew that it would be me in the back of the crowd going, "I'm here!" or me videotaping. It's crazy, the number of videotapes of the kids playing sports, and if you hear anybody in the back of the stands

yelling, you know it's Mom. I am always trying to cheer them on and always yelling for them. I'm always trying to make them achieve higher goals instead of doing what they think they can do. I'm always trying to make them achieve higher and I think that worked pretty good. I'm always encouraging them to try to be the better person and never just settle for 'okay,' always trying to be their best and do their best.

My mom has definitely showed me how to be a good mom, and I think I've been a good mom. My mom was almost 40 when she had me, so I was basically raised as an only child. My sister left when she was 19 and got married. My brother left at 17. And I'm the youngest, and so I was raised pretty much with adults. I got everything I ever wanted. That was okay, I guess. I think it's made me see things in a totally different light because I didn't really have kid friends, I had older friends.

My brother and I were really close when I was younger. I was always on the back of his motorbike. He has no kids now, so my kids are the only nieces and nephews that he has on the blood side. He has kind of made his own life, now, and that kind of saddens me because we were always really close. Now when I go out of town to visit him where he lives, I'm uncomfortable at my brother's house. My sister and I have a good relationship. As mad as my sister makes me sometimes, when I'm at my sister's place, I'm just melting, like I feel just so welcome. Basically I treat her house like it's mine, and that's how we've always been. And with her oldest kid, there is only ten years difference between us, so that's been kind of cool having a nephew that is only ten years younger than me. But yeah my family, we have a good relationship going on.

My mom was always there for me. My dad was always working and stuff like that, he was never really home much, same thing as always. So it was always my mom. I remember

my mom being at my volleyball and basketball games, and in grade school my mom would make this four-tier cake for every party we had. I'll never forget it, this cake, each layer was a different colour, and people would say, "Oh, it's Yovela's mom's cake." I think she kind of instilled that in me, being involved in my life. So I am totally involved in my kids' life. Totally.

One thing, though, my mom is very modest, where I'm not so modest. She does surprise me sometimes, but she is very old school and I am not. I'm not the type of person to be very strait-laced. I mean, there are certain lines that you don't cross and I do not, like when it's time to be a mom, I'm a mom. But when there's time for play, I'm right there. If there is an open-liner, I'm there, I'm jumping in.

It is the same with my oldest daughter, Ayla. Ayla is talking about having kids in the next little while. And I'm like, okay, big step, just make sure you guys are prepared for this. I am sure they will be, Ayla will be an awesome mom. But I'm still like, that's my baby girl and she's going to be having babies. It is heart-wrenching in a way. You know, part of me is carried through to her, and now she is going to be having kids. Ayla kept her virginity until she was 19; I'm very proud of that, and I am very proud of her. It was never scary for me with Ayla because she was more sports-oriented. She was very popular in a different sort of way and she didn't cause me to worry. Her friends were good, good people. And even now, she's 21 and we have the best relationship ever. Ayla and I have always interacted really well. I mean we've had our spits and spats, especially growing up and through the teenage years and all that sort of stuff. But with Ayla, we could talk about anything and we still can. When I say anything, we're talking *anything* we can talk about. She is very comfortable in any situation with me.

There was one night Ayla and I, and maybe her brother Noah might have been there, we made a big spaghetti dinner. And the humour in our relationship, Ayla and I, is retarded, it's like having two young kids here. And Noah is the third one that comes along and he pulls us all together. Ayla's boyfriend, Evan, was here, and Evan didn't know me very well yet. We just started talking at the dinner table and some things were a little inappropriate, like the way we were talking about the spaghetti and stuff. We were talking about slurping spaghetti, and of course Ayla and I looked at one another and boom, the lights went on. We just started going on and on about slurping spaghetti, and turning this around into a funny sexual thing. Ayla and I have the same line of thinking, and if we can turn anything around into a funny sexual thing we will. But Ayla and I are just killing ourselves laughing, and Evan is just shocked. I don't know if he was shocked because of what Ayla and I were saying or the way we were carrying on with each other, it was just hilarious. But Evan is sitting there totally mortified and like, "Oh, my God," and of course, the more reaction we get out of Evan, the more it goes. That episode with the spaghetti, poor Evan, I felt so sorry for him.

We don't do this stuff around Yvonne, my youngest daughter. She is 13 and she just doesn't get it. That might be because of her age, or our sarcasm, she is just not getting it. And we don't get her sarcasm either. It is frustrating, different parenting for different daughters. But I mean, Yvonne, she's not Ayla, she never will be. And Yvonne, well, we're working on that. To be honest with you I don't know if Yvonne is engaging in anything like sex or relationships. She is ten years younger than my oldest, Craig. But Yvonne is not your typical 13-year-old. She has a learning disability, and her mind is a lot more immature. She tries to follow the 14 and 15 year olds, but honestly I don't think that she is doing anything. I could be totally wrong and totally blind-sided, but I don't think so. I think she is a little bit too shy.

I did catch Yvonne one night holding onto a young man's hand and I was mortified. I am going, "That is my baby, what is going on here?" But anything else, I don't think so. I mean, I could be wrong, you know? It is very scary with teens nowadays. Yvonne is 13, and teens at that age and even younger are getting into the alcohol scene and the drug scene. I just don't want her to get involved in that and sex. I guess I want to keep her pure like I kept her sister. I don't know, I just think kids at that age, they are into drinking, and I mean I know that she has had a few things to drink, but under the supervision of an adult or her older brother. That doesn't make it right or wrong but at least there was supervision. I feel better knowing that her older brother was there, but it doesn't make it any better to know that she has had drinks or whatever. So the sexuality part, it is scary. She has had her cycle since she was 11, so if she gets mixed up with the wrong person and anything can happen, right? That is scary for me. And with Yvonne, with some of her friends, I just don't know. They talk about pit parties and all that kind of stuff and yes, that's very scary. That is very different than with Ayla.

Yvonne shuts me right off, and that frustrates me. I'm the kind of mom, I have to know. If you shut me off, I'm asking more questions, so we're getting more frustrated because you're not answering me the way I want you to answer me. Yeah, Yvonne is closed off and I don't know whether that's her personality or her learning disability or what. But I'll get to the bottom of it!

It's been really hard for Yvonne, being the youngest and with that ten years difference. With her brothers and sister, it was always Yvonne was the brat, the little sister that got into all the trouble, bugging them and stuff. I could relate to that because that was me when I was that age, I was the little sister. My brothers and sisters are the same age difference as Craig

and Ayla are to her. But they've gotten better. Yvonne is getting better at understanding the concept of don't be saying stuff you don't mean, stuff like that. But it's just, Yvonne is too young.

Noah, my youngest son, he has always said to Yvonne, don't lie to mom because she will know, she will find out, and if she finds out later, you are in big caca. Be straight up with her and straight forward. He says, "That's a hard lesson that I learned. I'm not like that anymore, so don't you start."

The beauty of Noah, he's got that whole aura around him that is like a beaming yellow, come and get me kind of thing. Even when he was in school with the mentally challenged kids, Noah would be willing to help the teacher. Some kids would say yeah, no. But Noah would. The kids just adored him because he helps with everything. Noah is my 17-year-old, and he started very young. He had lost his virginity at 13 which is kind of scary. He was in a relationship that none of us were happy about, but the way I look at it is he's got to learn by his mistakes. I would try and guide him and say your girlfriend, she shouldn't be doing that, you have got to make your own decisions and your own choices, but the young girl he was dating was very over-powering and I didn't like that, not at all. Ayla and Noah would discuss a lot of that together because Ayla wasn't happy with the situation either. Noah was dating this girl for two years and there were a lot of issues, even some dangerous issues that we are still dealing with now. But he's never really had a serious relationship except for the last one that he just had, and it was just too over-powering for him. I think at 16, 17, you should just have fun, not be told what to do, where to go, that's not a girlfriend's job; that's a mom's job. So that situation with his girlfriend was dangerous, and that was sad, but it grew

him up. He had no choice, he had to grow up because there were things we had to go through after the fact.

If you ever met Noah, you would see he is just a great kid, he just took a couple wrong paths, but all in all, a great kid. He is the one that really shines. When he sees my friends, he always makes sure he hugs them and says hello and totally acknowledges them. I've found that other people's kids don't do that as much unless you make the initial effort to say hi to them, but Noah, and my kids, they are just great. I love them a lot.

Noah and Craig, my oldest son, are living with Yates, their dad. Craig talks to me a little about his relationships. Now that I've thought about it more, he's talked to me a bit about his situation and the relationship he is in. When Craig and his girlfriend, Maddy were together, she would talk to me more than Craig would. I don't know whether Craig is embarrassed about some of the things that have gone on in their relationship because now it is over, if he feels it's a failure or he just can't be bothered. But he needs to deal with it. He needs to talk about it and get other people's opinions, and not just his friends. He needs the kind of been there, done that, talking about it. And maybe he might get a different idea of how to deal with things.

I absolutely adore Maddy, Craig's former girlfriend. I honestly think she was one of the best things to come along in Craig's life. But they've been together since they were 14 and never branched out. I remember when Craig, who is now 23, being 15 years old. And we were at the table eating dinner and I right out asked him if he was a virgin. And he looked at me kind of shocked and he said, "No." And I'm thinking, that's good. He's been with Maddy for a year and a half and I was just curious. You know it was quite funny, I think Ayla was there. Yvonne would have only been five so she would have had no clue what we were

talking about, and I think Noah, too, honestly had no clue what we were talking about. But Ayla was definitely there, and come to think of it, I think she gave me kind of a funny look. Yates, their dad, was also there for that conversation. But I wanted to know, and that's how I am, that's how I've always been. I want to know, and I want to make sure I've taught my kids to use protection and be safe. I was just curious that day, and so it just nonchalantly, boom, came out then. I can't say I was shocked, like I didn't think, "Oh my God, my baby" kind of thing. I was surprised, yes. But also in a good way because I think once you've passed that kind of step as a young teen or a middle teen, you kind of have a tendency to grow up a little. There's a kind of responsibility to entail, and you have to look after that responsibility and take precautions and stuff. So, that was an interesting day. But we didn't really talk after that, he just left dinner and went out with Maddy and did their thing. I guess I figured he was 15, he had been dating Maddy for over a year and I was just curious and wanting to know if things were going further along, or whether they were just doing the holding hands, kissing in the corner kind of thing.

My oldest daughter was a little bit surprised, but she should know coming from me that it shouldn't have been a, "Oh my God" kind of thing because of how I am. So maybe the family was just a little shocked but there was no in-depth conversation with that at all. I think Yates just went, "Okay," and didn't really say anything else at all. There have been times when Craig has talked to me about certain issues but I think he more or less keeps it inside and tries to deal with it on his own. And he can't, he just can't. He's not good with dealing. He keeps a lot inside.

The last time we all got together was Easter. And for Craig it was just hi, goodbye, like he came in Friday and left Monday. But of course, he's got to see all his friends, too. They've just gotten older, and now I'm just not being such a big part of their lives anymore.

. As the kids got older, they definitely got closer to each other and definitely started expressing themselves more. They are more often saying I love you man, I miss you, messaging on Facebook about how much they love each other. That is absolutely wonderful. Growing up, they did not do that so much. Ayla and Noah are very, very close, which is awesome. Some of that is hard now because part of the family is in another province.

I really miss that, the closeness, and now with Yates gone, too, it's hard to adjust. That is tough on me. But with the kids growing up over the years, it was always me. I mean, don't get me wrong, Yates is an awesome dad, he really is. And when Craig and Ayla were younger, he would take them camping and fishing. I would stay home and they would have their time. I guess with Noah, that still happened a little bit, but with Yvonne they didn't do any of that anymore.

Yates never really did have a role, it was basically me. I did all the carpooling. I did all the sports and other activities. He just didn't get himself involved unless I made him get involved. When we had the situation with Noah and his former girlfriend, I said, "You have got to step up to the plate and be a parent." He said, "You're doing a pretty good job." And I said, "He knows he has my support and love, he now needs to know he has you." That was tough on me. But he did step up to the plate, he came here for a little while. He wasn't going to come home to the Central Interior, but I said no, you need to be here. I don't care if it's just for five minutes: you're here, you're home, your son needs to know you're 100% behind him.

And it was great because he was there and Noah knew he was there. I think that was the best step Yates ever did.

I can see it now that Yates does not feel that family pull, that family connection. The way I see it is that Yates had a really tough childhood. His mom was always very sick. She had surgeries, she had serious infections, and was always a very, very sick lady. Yates, growing up, he was totally out of control, drinking to an oblivious at the age of 14, and he just didn't have the family pull like I did, you know. That saddens me. I am starting to realize the real relationship that Yates had with his parents and there just wasn't one. And now, as a dad, Yates just basically stood back and watched. I just wish he would have kicked in more.

I mean, Yates worked a lot too, especially when Ayla and Craig were little. But it's like I raised these kids on my own. I mean, it was okay because I was younger. There were times when Yates wanted to do things he liked, like go camping and fishing, and he would go a lot with my mom and dad to the cabins at the lakes around here. The kids have good memories of that, and it's awesome, I like that. I chose not to go so they could have their time without me intervening.

Yates, he's an awesome dad, it's just the relationship with him and I that is different. He never went to any of the sport events I am involved with, and sometimes he would say, "Well, you just didn't want me to go anyway." I mean, honestly, grow up. It's sad, Yates is so old school. Maybe it's because of his upbringing, he doesn't know any different. He really wants us all to move out of the province, but I don't know if our relationship will fall apart or stay strong. I could have moved with him but I chose not to for reasons he doesn't understand. He thinks I should have stood right beside him but I couldn't, there just wasn't enough there for me to go, which is sad.

We had good times, it's just now things are different. Things are weird, it's really changed. I don't think I have changed, and nobody else seems to think that I have changed, it's just that he has and now we just have to deal with it. It is always in the back of my mind that I don't know how our relationship will go. I just wish he'd come home. But there are no jobs in the Central Interior, so he chooses to stay there. I honestly don't think I will be happy away from the Central Interior; I would be trapped and I don't want to feel like that.

With everyone separate like this and the house empty, there's sometimes when I'm like, ahhhh, peace and quiet. But usually, I always like having a display and having tons of people around all the time. In my family, that means a kiss hello, a kiss goodbye, and if you can't do that then don't come in. I don't want to think like a 40-year-old, but when the time comes when I do have to, I switch back and forth. I've just always been involved in my kids' life and I think that a parent being able to talk that openly to my kids is a great thing. It's a great communication line to have. I want to know absolutely everything that they have going on in their lives, with relationships and everything like that. I'm always very open and honest with my kids, maybe a little too honest. But I want to know what my kids are doing.

One thing I've always said to my kids is, if you guys are going to be doing this kind of stuff [sex/intimacy] in the house, I want you to understand that the basement and the family room do not belong to you. Beware that if you're down in the family room and anything is going on, you aren't going to have a chance to start covering yourself up. Have respect for your younger brothers and sisters. You have a bedroom and you have a door and whenever that door is closed, I will knock on it.

I don't agree with them having sex, but I'd much rather know where they are, in a safe environment, and not doing it in the back of a car. And with sleepovers and stuff like that, I

am fine with it because I know where they are. Other people don't agree with it, some people think they shouldn't be doing stuff like having sex, but it's going to happen sooner or later and I would like to know about it, and be able to have that open conversation and communication with them.

Our family is different. The openness in our family, the way our family has been growing up, it is incredible. I don't think all families are like that. I think that has made me work even harder to have a very solid and good relationship with my kids, beyond and above what normal parents' relationships would be. I love hanging out with the younger guys. Well, that's funny, let me rephrase that! The younger people, I can just relate to them, I just love the energy. To me, it's just the norm, and I think every parent should be able to have a good relationship like that with their kids and their kids' friends. You don't want to be known as the Big B with their friends, especially at the age of 14, 15, because you just aren't going to know where your kids are.

All my kids' friends have been great. They are so much fun, and they don't single me out like don't talk to that lady, it's Craig's mom. It's not like that. And to be able to have an association with their friends, it's great to do that. It's just great hanging out with them. I would never go to their parties, but just to sit down and have a conversation, I love that. It's nice when their friends come over, it's nice to have the feeling that they feel welcome. Yvonne's friends, and even Ayla's friends will come over and the topics we talk about, and the way that we interact with each other, they are saying, your mom's really open and that's cool. I've had good relationships with their friends. A few issues, but I put them in their place and they now respect me for that. There have been times when friends have overstepped their boundaries, and I say this is how it is and if you don't like it, there's the door. If you do

things that are totally unacceptable I will call you on it. If you want respect from me than I need it back, you need to respect me and show me that. So they're like, yeah your mom's cool. And I'm not looking for that, but I want them to feel that if they're having an issue that they can come talk to me about it.

Ayla's boyfriend now of two years, Evan, he's so welcome in this house. He walks into the door like it's his own. There are some things I don't enjoy, like going into the cupboards and the fridge and stuff like that. But we talk. Like the other night I went up to Ayla and Evan's, and it's awesome to be able to sit outside and be able to have a normal conversation, and for him to be able to feel that comfortable to talk to me, like we can talk about anything. It's awesome.

When the kids have a relationship, that partner is totally part of the family. Like I would go and say goodnight to Craig when he lived at home, and do the little night-time ritual and give him a kiss, and it would be the same for Maddy, I would kiss her on the cheek and say goodnight, see you guys in the morning. I open the kid's relationships into the family with open arms. You are a part of me if you are a part of my child's life. And I like to be right there, to know what's going on.

Honestly, I am very open with my kids. I am very straightforward and very blunt. I am constantly asking them questions. Right now I am constantly asking Noah, how are you and your dad getting along? And Yates, he's basically the one who just steps back and listens, and I'm always the one who's asking the questions. And having the support of Yates, not as much as I would have liked, because he had to move, but having some support helps.

I hope that the kids are not like their dad when they are parents. I don't want them to step back and watch and take note of their kids but not participate. I think participation is a

very big thing. It brings good memories, you know? It's a memory, yeah, that was my dad that did that. I think that's good, I think they should be 100% with their own kids. I want my kids to kick in more, and kind of take over for their girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife relationship. I hope that, for Yvonne and Ayla, that the father of their children is totally involved, not so set back like Yates was. As for my two sons, I want them to be solely involved, and have like 50-50, if not 60-40 split. I know my daughters will be good parents. I know Ayla will be totally involved with her kids, 125%. And Evan, Ayla's boyfriend, he will be too. He will be there 24-7 as well.

Noah and Craig, I can visualize them being the coach, getting into whatever sport that their children decide to be in.

My kids are all graduating and they stayed in school and that's awesome and that's just great. That's just my outlook, I don't know. But I miss the family being together, that is hard. We were always outdoors, playing in the park, outdoor volleyball, badminton, scrub at the school when the kids were younger. We used to try to make one night on Friday or Saturday, we would watch a movie. I really miss that. To have everybody interact with one another, I miss the family. It's just not often that we are all together. I really miss those times, the family times. Even just sitting around together. But this, this interview has brought up lots of stuff, more than I thought. I always knew it was there, but it's good.

When I reflect on the story that I shared, I realized that I didn't spend a lot of time talking about what a great kid Yvonne is, even though she is only 13. I also made Yates sound kind of like a deadbeat, so maybe someday I can think more about that, and say more about that. Maybe I will give some thought to it and do some of my own writing about this someday.

Illustration 2: Yovela's Family Drawing



Xia

When my mom got pregnant with me, people didn't talk about it. No one would ask the girl, oh, have you got a doctor? No, she was sent away. Our grandparents never talked about stuff like that. My mom got pregnant with me as a 'graduation present', and I guess that was way back in the 60s and it wasn't dealt with very well. My biological dad's mom knew about me, and her idea of how to deal with it was to pay my mom off to go somewhere and get rid of me before I was born, so that didn't go over well. My mom finally told her parents that she was pregnant, and so she got sent to my aunt's place until she had me. After I was born we moved back here to the Central Interior and my mom lived with my grandparents until I was a year old and she met my stepdad. They got married, and he is what I know as a dad figure. Mom was social with her friends, but when she met my stepdad that changed some. He has a very dominating personality. He worked in the bush as a logger, out there he would cut down trees with power saws, old school type stuff. When he was home from camp, he would demand attention. He would say jump and she would say how high, how long. There were times when I was like, wow. Our family dynamic, it just was not a good thing.

I'm looking now at how my past home life was and how things were handled and sex was never talked about. Never at home. And religion was not even remotely allowed in that door. A lot of that stemmed from my stepdad. He was raised in a very strong Catholic home and that didn't go well for him. Dad was abused in the church diocese thing, and that's why religion was never allowed in the house. You didn't dare bring a bible or anything like that in the house. The abuses, that didn't happen in every church, there are some good churches and some good religion, but we didn't dare talk about it. A lot of that had to do with the residential schools, and the priests, and the sexual abuse, and then I lived with that, because I

was then sexually abused by my stepdad. What happened to him with the church and the residential school doesn't justify what he did, or the amount of fear that was put into my life, or like the psychological mind games that he did. But because I lived with it, there are certain things that made me hypersensitive to other issues that I am really vigilant about now as an adult. I became more educated about what resources are out there for people of sexual abuse. I am vigilant about the warning signs, how to look for it, be more in tune with it.

A part of growing up for me was learning what I *didn't* want out of life and what I wasn't going to put up with in life. As an adult now, I still have fear of my stepdad. He made me uneasy and I still don't want to be in a room alone with him. I worry about my children around him. I thought if he could do that to me he could do that to them. I was talking to a friend of mine and he was asking me, how do you not want to just kill this person? And it's still what I know as my dad, he raised me from a year old. He is just the hugest waste to have in my life. Recently he admitted to my mom that he really did a lot of damage. He's never said anything like that to me, and I don't give a shit that he said that to my mom. Maybe he's got the realization of it, but I am the person he needs to say that I'm sorry I screwed up and I'm sorry that I hurt you in that way. I don't know if he ever will admit that. That really hurts.

I feel like my age group is more aware of how things are, rather than when our parents were growing up. Everything was a secret then. I guess it's the fear and the mind games that give someone who does sexual abuse power, I don't know. I don't understand how somebody can do that to another child. I don't think people understand the fear that my stepdad, the perpetrator or however you want to call him, the power that they have over a child. Now, as an adult, my mom will say to me, why didn't you ever say anything? And to me, as a parent, I

look at that and go, how did you not know? My personality changed. I became very withdrawn. I shut down and didn't want to talk about stuff. It changed my personality.

At one point my mom found something out, and we packed up and we left home, and she said we weren't going back. We drove out of town about half an hour, and I was like, yes, finally! I'm free of it! We got to a gas station at the bottom of the road and she stopped there for a few minutes. Then we turned around and went back home. And that's when I shut down. You know, I suddenly had all this trust in her, thinking that I'm not going to have to deal with the abuse, and she turned around and went back home. That was a turning point. It changed how I dealt with stuff. At that point I became a very angry 13-year-old and I didn't talk to her after that. I was done. I moved out when I was 16 and I stopped communicating. I basically stayed away from my family. I grew up a lot faster than most because of my situation and because I left home. Most of my friends worried about what they had to wear to the next party, who they were going to hang out with, who their friends were, while I had a job and rent and stuff to worry about. So I didn't get to have that part of young life.

When I met my husband, Lance, I was renting a suite from his parent's. We were not even really dating, but I was living there for about six months or so, and one day I came home from work and his stuff is all in the middle of my room. And it was my room, I had been renting that space. So I didn't really have any privacy. And his family didn't have boundaries. They would come into my apartment all the time, into the suite, and that annoyed the hell out of me. Sometimes when I'd go out, when I would get back they'd say, "Where the hell were you?" and I'm thinking, I rent from you, I don't live with you. So at that point I told Lance, I'm moving, and you can either come with me or stay here. But I'm moving out. In Lance's family, they did things different. So I would watch kind of nervous and had to say,

okay, if you aren't on page with me, it is really important for you to be on page for planning for our own kids.

One of his sisters would start making up little lies when she didn't quite get her way. She tried to break up my relationship with Lance by telling him that I was seeing other guys. And so I confronted her and she and I got into a fist fight about that. And then his mom, emotionally his mom wasn't really there, and I disagreed with her parenting methods. One year on Lance's birthday she started calling him down, saying he was a crappy son and a poor excuse for a man. I told her to shut up and that she needed to grow up, and she slapped me. And you don't hit me. My first response was to hit her back. I feel kind of embarrassed about it, but she hit me and my reflex was to hit her back. She started to hit me again and that's when I grabbed her arm. I actually had an internal dialogue and stopped myself and I thought, Oh my God, I am going to break something on this woman and so then I said to myself, Okay, I'm not going to partake in this. And I stepped back and said, you're not worth the time, and I walked out of the house. I stopped wanting to have anything to do with my in-laws.

Lance's mom was really a person who used guilt on people, and so was my father-in-law. Lance's dad had a heart condition so whenever he didn't get his way he would put his hand on his chest and act like he couldn't breathe. He would hyperventilate or fake it until he'd have to go to the hospital, and as soon as he ended up in the hospital everyone would be doing what he wanted. It got to the point where he cried wolf too many times for me. It got to the point where I wouldn't go over to their place. There has always been this conflict between his family and me.

I guess his mom used to hit the kids. She was a hitter and that's how she dealt with things. My husband has a hearing problem because of his dad hitting him. Seeing all this and knowing this gave me validation of the kind of parent I *didn't* want to be. Before we even had kids, I was like Lance, here's the thing. I was up front with him about stuff like that. I had a very clear cut idea of how I wanted discipline and stuff, and how I wanted things to work with the family. In the beginning it was very important for me that my partner would be on the same page of how that would work, before we had kids.

There are so many parents today that I see, one parent does one thing, one parent does another thing. There's no common ground and they're undermining what each other is doing. Lance is not good at knowing boundaries of what is appropriate and what's not. I don't mean appropriate in any kind of sexual way. It's just he doesn't realize our daughters are growing up, and he doesn't know how to interact with them. He still thinks they are at a kid age where he can tease them and bug them. But now they're moving into teenage years and they don't want to be bugged by their dad. They don't want him nitpicking and in their face, snooping or listening or having to be guarded about what they say. Sometimes Lance thinks its fun to kind of tease our oldest, Malinda. She doesn't take well to being teased. She gets a little more vocal and pissy but he doesn't get it. They butt heads usually for about a week, a week and a half. And I just say, "Leave her alone!" He says, "She's so emotional." I just want him to leave her alone.

It made me uncomfortable if Malinda or Heidi, our youngest, would be lying down and Lance would go lie down on the bed and talk to her or read her a story. That would make me uncomfortable. With the background of sexual abuse, I'm just hypersensitive about stuff. I don't know if that's paranoia or what.

Lance is never part of my discussions with the girls. He doesn't participate in the discipline or anything. It's really odd to say it that way because before I had kids we were really on the same page, but now he just leaves it to me, like you deal with it. He says, "They're girls. You deal with it." He does not like the idea of talking with Malinda about sex and stuff. I had to have a discussion with him where I said, look, she's getting to be at an age where if we're not careful and explain it to her in a certain way, she's going to be doing it without our knowledge. For me, it is very important that the girls know what is appropriate and what is not, and to give them a voice for that stuff. We've talked about things, mostly just conversation in general, but for me, with the background of sexual abuse, it has been even more important to be in touch with certain issues about men around my kids.

There was a situation where Malinda ran away, and a whole build up of stuff came with her running away. I should tell you, Malinda has a history of brain damage, so her impulse control is not the same as most kids. For example, she is very friendly and very huggy, she will go up to strangers and just introduce herself and carry on. She is very 'no fear.' So Malinda and I have had many discussions about what is safe, what is not safe. I had to explain to her why that was, that someone could steal her, someone could hurt her, but I didn't want to scare her to the point where she was paranoid of everything. She has been a fun kid!

Malinda has always had boyfriends. I encouraged her to bring her friends and her boyfriends to the house, and I always gave her privacy to be in her room as long as I could trust her with it. As soon as that trust is broken, sit in the living room! I think she has had three or four boyfriends since she was 13, and she is 19 now. One boy, Tyler, she dated for two years. She was actually engaged to him for a while but just finally decided to break that

off. I was relieved she broke it off with Tyler because the situation where Malinda ran away, that really broke my trust in both of them.

How do I tell you about Tyler? Tyler is a boy that came from a broken home. His mom was on drugs, so he lived with his dad for most of his life. Tyler's dad is... different. I mean, they're nice enough people, they just don't have the same values as I have when it come to certain things, so there are some problems there. Tyler used to spend a lot of time with us because of his family situation. And he would be in Malinda's room and I always trusted her that way. The door was always open, and I'd pop in and check on them, just for my own benefit. And I didn't want her to think just because it is her room she can do whatever he wants in it! But Tyler was welcome here and I was fine with that.

During this time, there was an incident that happened between Malinda and Heidi and Malinda was very angry with Heidi. Malinda decided that she needed a break from the family, and Tyler offered that Malinda could come stay at his house, with his dad and stepmom. She went to school Monday morning, but she didn't come home that night. There was no call or indication that she was running away. I phoned her cell and Tyler picks up and is really rude with me and informed me that Malinda wasn't coming home. I phoned the RCMP but they said they can't force her to come home. Later I finally got a hold of her and we talked. I told her I love you, I will always love you. I don't agree with what you are doing, but when you are ready to talk and ready to come home, let me know. I wanted her to come home, and it was important for me to have her do that. So she had a little cry and she said I just needed a little break.

In the meantime, Tyler concocted a story that Malinda was being abused by Lance, and you know, that just opened a whole can of worms. We had Social Services at my door and they did an investigation. Social services came to the conclusion that there were no issues or anything with sexual abuse.

Malinda came back a week later, and I asked her if she felt that she was being sexually abused. She said no, she was just angry. It was a really hard transition for her when she came back. And for a little while I said, "Look, Malinda, I really can't talk to you right now, because I'm really angry with you and I don't want to yell at you, and I don't want to get mad at you, but I need you to not bug me for a little bit." I didn't want to react in a way that was going to upset her. I tried not to be angry, but it was really hard to put it in check. I really had to step back from her for a bit, but I also wanted her to know how I felt and how what she did hurt me. We had quite a few discussions about that, probably more than she wanted. Maybe too much at one point, because she kind of shut down. At one point she got defensive, but it didn't seem like she heard me. I was just vibrating angry.

This situation really put my own past in the forefront. It really made sexual abuse prevalent. I wondered if there was stuff I was missing. I second guessed everything I was doing. Did I instill the right things, do they know what is acceptable, what is her body and her personal space? What she is allowed to do? Stuff like that. That really, really played a big part of it. I just was worrying, from my past issues with sexual abuse, that even with someone I trust like Lance. It's still in the back of my mind, I am always watching.

That's not all, what I mean by a whole can of worms is I also come to find out that Malinda and Tyler were having sex while they were at his house. They would be able to go in

and close the door and do whatever they were doing, basically no one would bother them. To me, as a parent, there are certain limits. Malinda is still under my roof, there are still my rules. My rules are pretty liberal but at the same time, you're not having sex at my house until you are married. Tyler's parents have different ideas.

Malinda wasn't on birth control. I'd always discussed it with her, to make sure you're taking precautions. We live in a society now where stuff like STDs, AIDS, it's all the forefront of unprotected sex. I mean, it's not just pregnancy anymore. I want to make sure she knows it's her body. I want to make sure that she's safe. That also means making sure that if she is going to have sex with a guy, he is wearing a condom and she is on some form of birth control. The first thing I did after I found out they were having sex was phoning the doctor. I told her she would get a pap test done and if she is going to have sex she is going to be protected. We booked the full meal deal, that's what I called it. Pap test, pregnancy test, HIV, discussion about birth control and the different types and how to use it. And I stayed with her for the whole thing, I didn't care if it was embarrassing.

I also phoned Tyler's parents and said I want to inform you that I took Malinda for a pregnancy test and that she and your son are having sex. And Tyler's parents said, "So?" I just wanted to let her know what I was doing, and she says that she already knew that they were having sex. I wonder, didn't she think it would be appropriate to maybe call me and let me know? And she says, "I wasn't going to rat them out." And at that point, my whole demeanour changed because I was talking with someone who wasn't even rational. I would have liked to know before they were having sex, or at least right after so we wouldn't have to deal with this. At that point the conversation was just over.

My anger about her running away and lying about the sexual abuse, it then shifted towards Tyler. He wasn't allowed in the house. I didn't want him near my family and he wasn't welcome in my house anymore. I didn't stop Malinda from seeing him, I just limited how often they could be together. The thing that got me was that we had allowed him in our house. He told us that things weren't really good at home for him, so we gave him a safe place to be able to go. To think of the lie that they cooked up, and a Social Services investigation. There was a report saying nothing was found, but it is still in my file. I hate to say I am embarrassed by it, but that's how it is. It's a shame thing. I thought, how did this happen? It took a lot for me to step back from the anger aspect of it. But we're dealing with it.

I personally wish she would have gone to my brother's house if she needed a break. Since then, we have talked about how if the girls ever feel that way, they can go to Uncle's. He is a safe environment, he is someone I trust that will be able to talk to her and not spin her head in a million different directions. He is an adult that she can vent to and will listen and express stuff with. I love my brother dearly. In some ways I kind of idolize my brother. I am learning that he is a human too, and he is a bit of a dick sometimes, but I look at his relationship and his history with the abuse and see that is part of it. I can talk to my brother, but only so much, he shuts down instantly if something gets too difficult. He just won't talk about it anymore, or if he gets angry he won't talk about it. Because of our parents, his commitment issues are really big, and he is kind of flighty in some ways. When we were a kid, he went off for a year and a half, my mom thought he was dead. Then he shows up expecting everything is fine and that is just *not* good for me. I told him he better not do that with my girls. If he can't be a constant in their life, just stay away.

My brother will often say to me, you are such a bitch. And I'll say, yes, I am. It keeps me safe. That is the complete opposite of my mom, who is like a jellyfish. You know, don't rock the boat. As an adult now I can talk to my mom about stuff like that. When my kids were starting to grow up and I had been married and was on my own, I wanted clarification for my mom about the abuse from my stepdad. I was searching for a way to put everything that happened to me *away*. And as a mom I wanted to be more in tune with what I was watching with my own kid. I was started to think, how did she not know? So I chose to talk to her about it, very carefully. She gets tied up in knots about it.

If I can keep all that stuff out of my girls' face, even half of what I had to go through as a kid, then as a parent, I'm doing my job. I'm very hand-on with the girls. I'm always talking with them, and we'll always take time to sit down and just talk. We don't include other people. I find you get more out of them if it's just us. Sometimes we'll go for a drive and start talking about stuff, and that will be my way of bringing up certain things without asking, "So, what did you do today," when every kid is going to say, "Nothing." If I go through the backdoor by asking other questions, usually I'll get them finally talking about something. I always want them to be smart about things. It's about making sure they can make educated decisions about life and the things they're going to have to go through.

To me, I think kids are kids, and they are going to have sex. And I always told my kids that no matter what, I want them to be able to come to me and talk to me. That is a conversation I have had over and over with them. Not just about sexuality but everything. I know there are things they are going to do. I know they are going to try smoking, I know they are going to try pot. I'm not naïve enough to think they're not. There's peer pressure, and it's

important for me to be able to go through that relationship with them and to have these discussions.

Malinda likes to watch this show called Teen Moms. It's all about these girls that are pregnant and now they are moms. I think it gave Malinda a sense of, wow, I don't want to be there, you know? But again, she's 19 now and she's made it a heck of a lot further than most of the kids her age. There are four kids we know that are her age that are pregnant, some of them are younger than her. One of her friends got married and had a baby on purpose!

When Malinda was young, she would play a lot by herself. That concerned me because she could be isolated from other people and manipulated. She just had no fear, she didn't mind wandering around or wandering off. Malinda has always been very open with people. She will just jump in and start talking, like everybody is her friend, and in the back of my mind, I am always watching. She doesn't have the understanding of the ramifications of not fearing people. I spent a lot of time with Malinda telling her that there's certain people that can do certain things that are harmful to you, and that does not just mean strangers, it can be anyone. For me that was an issue because I don't want her to be scared of people, but I don't want her to think she can just walk off with anybody. But those are my issues, I had to try to make sure not to make her paranoid.

Now that she is 19, she is an adult and she can make her own decisions, but she still has to deal with the consequences of those choices. I've told Malinda that many times. She says it's her body, and I say yes, it is, but if she chooses not to be smart about it, as the adult and as her guardian I will make those choices for her. I am not going to waiver on that one. For me that was important for her to know. It has been hard for me to trust her. That is

something she has to earn. And she thought I was punishing her, but I was saying no, these are just going to be the rules now.

Heidi is five years younger than Malinda, and things were totally different with Heidi. Heidi will sit back and watch and study people before she will engage with them. She is just a completely different child. She is younger, but maturity-wise, she is a lot more advanced in her thought process. I think that is because she has watched Malinda grow up and heard how open I was with Malinda. Heidi and I are a little bit closer. Personality-wise, I think we are a little the same, and we have always had an open relationship.

There were times when Heidi went through a phase where he was lying, but I just talked to her and said, we're not going to play this game. I know that you are lying to me, you are better off to tell me the truth than to lie to me and have things ten times worse. Lying is something I don't deal with well. I'm very up front with the girls, don't lie to me. Just tell me the truth, and I can deal with it better. If you lie to me, I'm going to be pissed, and then the trust you've built with me is gone. And you know what? I've been there, I've done it. I've probably done more than they have done, I'm not going to be a hypocrite about it.

Heidi is very outgoing, very liberal, very accepting. She is just a people type of person. She is so mature, people don't always look at her as her age. Everyone that meets Heidi just thinks she is so polite and has such charisma. You know, everyone likes her. And she's such a smart kid.

Heidi has only had a couple of boyfriends, and they haven't been anything major. They have been over to the house and it's been mainly friendship type of stuff. I'm very conscious with Heidi about stuff like that. She has had older friends since she was very

young, and the topics they talk about and stuff...well I don't know if that is a good thing or a bad thing. My 14-year-old is comfortable interacting with twenty-somethings, and sometimes I look at it and go, what does a 26-year-old have in common with a 14-year-old? Some aspects of that bother me. But to them, they treat her like a little sister. They're very protective of her. Sometimes guys hit on Heidi and these older guys are saying, you know, you are going to have to get through us. That's how the boys are when it comes to Heidi. Who is this boyfriend and if he hurts you, he is Toasty Oats. That's a polite way of saying getting his ass kicked. I don't mind that Heidi has people that feel that way about her. It's nice that she has people looking out for her. But at the same time, to me she is a kid. She is 14, she needs to just have fun. She doesn't need to know everything about crystal meth, she doesn't need to know what tweaking means. I don't even know what tweaking means. But she knows this stuff through her older friends and I look at them and think, they need to be kids at that age. They should still be playing with Barbies.

Heidi and Uncle and I went for a walk and Heidi brought up the discussion of drugs. She says, "So, what drugs have you done, mom?" and I'm looking at her thinking you don't need to know. Well she says that's hypocritical, and I guess it is. I tell her the only thing I have ever done is smoked pot and done hash and I drink, and that is okay for her, that is all she needed to know. She didn't care that I had done it, she just wanted to know. So then she asks my brother and I'm thinking, don't answer that, please don't answer that. But he told her, and I knew he experimented with a lot more than I ever have, but even I got an eye opener!

Kids are growing up way too fast. You look around the mall and stuff, and you know kids are smoking earlier, kids know so much, and there are different drugs. When I was

growing up, there was pot. Woo hoo. Now there's crystal meth, there's ecstasy. Drugs are changing, and things are a lot more talked about. We're in a changing society, too. And you hear about it a lot more. There's TV awareness, it is in the papers and magazines. There's a lot more about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, and even condoms and birth control. It's not something to hide, and I'm tired of a lot of these issues being secrets. I think there is so much more awareness of it and society is so much more accepting.

We are really in an information age, and a technology age. As we're getting older the technology is getting more available and there is more knowledge getting out there, too. I think more people are in tap with it. My kids know more about computers than I do, and I think I'm pretty computer literate. Everything is in the computer age and there is so much information that's being put out there, whereas when our parents raised us, there wasn't really anything like that. The Internet? Nobody had computers!

I think I have a different approach with my kids. We haven't really talked about how they feel about the future, and it's kind of sparked me to think about that, and ask the girls how they feel. I don't want to be the parent that's like a brick wall, you know. I don't want to be their best friend, but I don't want to be the Hitler of the house. There is a fine line with finding a balance. I worry about the girls in the future, and this is something that Heidi and I have talked about. There is the sexual abuse, but also the dependency because my husband drinks. Statistically there is something about how a child of an alcoholic might be more prone to being an alcoholic. Also I look at my mom now, and she is still raising children. My sister, and my 18-year-old niece, are still living with my mom.

My sister, Nadia, is mentally retarded. Nadia wanted to be like me, so when I got pregnant with Malinda and had this baby, for her that was really cool, so she decided she wanted to have a baby too and she does. My sister has a child, my niece, who is 18 and she is also mentally retarded. Nadia and my niece live with my mom. My niece is done with school because she is legal age, and now my mom is going to have to look for other resources to keep my niece busy because she will never have a job.

So I am looking at my mom and saying to my girls, if you get pregnant, there is adoption out there. You are not having an abortion, that is only acceptable if it's incest or rape, that is the only time that an abortion is warranted or acceptable. But I've been very open with the girls about this that when they have kids, I am not going to be the 24-7 babysitter. I don't mind being a grandma, but I see that a lot. The grandparents end up having to raise the kid and take over. It's like they have another child. And no offense, but that's their responsibility. They chose not to close their legs and they're going to have the repercussions of it. That is a crude way of saying it, but I've raised my kids, I have my career, I'm not going to do it again. I know there are different controversies on that, but I figured you got pregnant, there's going to be consequences. It'll be either raising it up or giving it up for adoption. I'm not going to be a built-in babysitter. That is just not happening. I'm not going to make it easy. I'm not going to make it hell, either, I'm going to love it. But the girls are going to be the parent, they are not going to ditch it with me and continue their life as they always have. No. I'm not going to play that way.

You have to fight your battle the way you do. It's interesting to hear how my parents talk about their parents, and I often wonder how my kids talk about me when they think of certain things. When you are asking how I feel, every so often, it's like I feel that need to get

rid of it out of my mind. And for me, it's talking it out. Talking and talking and talking. They put that on my report card when I was a kid, "Xia loves to talk."

I don't know, I haven't really thought about this until you are talking about it. I guess that mother-bear instinct is there. God forbid, someone touches my kid, they are going to be Toasty Oats. I'm being polite, but if someone hurts my kid they'd better know how to get out of town fast. I don't know if that approach came from my own family learning, or if it's just my personality. I think it is a contribution from all those factors.

I think that a person's family situation makes their diversity. If somebody hasn't necessarily walked in your shoes, they might not necessarily have the same life experiences. I don't know if another family who hasn't been in my shoes can relate exactly to what I have been through or has the same parenting skills that I have. Everybody is so diverse.

People have asked if I had to do things over and change things in my life, would I, and honestly, no. Because the life experience that I've gone through made me who I am. *Who I am*. No, I don't think I would change it. I mean, I wouldn't want to have to go through it again, but I have made it, and it has made me who I am.

Illustration 3: Xia's Family Drawing



Wood

I've had some conversations with some of the guys about these kinds of things, you know, when we're drinking and talking. I think people's stories are different, being in the free country that it is. It is different for a lot of people because a lot of different things happen, right? I know there are some similarities. But I really don't think my story is similar to others. It helps me to talk about it and think about it, it helps for sure.

My mom and dad were married. My father wasn't really there, and actually later I had a stepfather for a big chunk of the time. But yeah, it affected me a lot that my dad wasn't around. My mom went through a lot, and I stuck by her the whole time. My mom fell into alcohol and the drugs and stuff like that. My mom has been through a lot herself. Her life has been crazy. She was sent away when she was only twelve to a Catholic residential school. You know about the abuse that happened there and everything like that. She told me some pretty crazy stories about them getting hit for speaking their language, and all the sick things that they did to her. The sexual abuse and shit? The Catholics felt that was right, which it wasn't at all. She ran away, and I don't blame her for running away. She's been through it all. I just think, wow, I couldn't believe that she had to go through all that. That's probably why she had kids at such a young age, though. She was only 15, 16 when she was having my older sister. And then later she had me.

My mom and I have been through a lot together. I always felt like I had to protect her., and we've been through a lot of stuff. I knew for a fact if I was gone out of her life she'd probably just, I don't know. So I just stuck it out with her the whole time. Just stuck it out. When I was in elementary school, the social worker would come to the school to talk to me.

My mom was going through alcoholism and she would abuse her prescriptions and was getting into the crack cocaine thing. A couple of times she'd overdosed. The social worker would come and want me to talk but I always felt like I had to protect my mom. I made it as comfortable as I could for my mom, because she was going through so much stuff and I really couldn't believe it. That's probably what helped her pull through, too; that and my little brother. And now my mom is pretty old, she's 57 or 58. Being a family helped us pull through.

I don't remember much growing up with my older sister, she was not really around too much. She was there until I was three, then she took off because there were some family problems. She and I don't have the same father. Her father died in a car accident. And I think most of the reason my sister left is because of my father. He was a bit of an alcoholic, and just drunk a lot of the time. When he drank he was pretty mean, like verbally mean. He and my mom fought a lot too, and she didn't really think much about seeing that. I think it was worse for her because her real father is dead. When my sister took off, I think that was like the gain of independence for her, independence from my mom and my dad. She didn't really have a place at that time, so she took off with her boyfriend. After that is when she had my nephew, which was just two years after I was born. Her relationship with my nephew's dad didn't really hit it off, they drank and fought a lot.

My sister has always been there for me, and she even babysat me. She would just give me what I wanted like junk food, chips, pop and just really spoiled me. I love my sister. I like being around her. It was almost like she liked hanging out with me and doing stuff together, like getting out of the house, going for walks, watching movies or whatever; she would take me to the theatre with her kids, because she had three kids of her own. I have two nephews

and a niece from my sister, and the three of us grew up together, too. My youngest nephew is 14 now. I babysat them, and changed their diapers and all that.

I have three sisters. One passed away, and so now I have two sisters and one brother. One of my sisters is lost. My mom had to give her up, she lives in another province.

My sister and my little brother, we always did stuff together. I always had to protect my little brother, too. My brother and me are inseparable, we've always been together. My brother has definitely learned a lot from me. I wasn't the greatest kid growing up, but I think that he was watching what I went through and that kept him in the right direction. You know, he would see me doing dumb stuff, like partying and drinking, and he wouldn't do the same thing. He wasn't into that for the longest time, so I thought that was really good. I don't think he ever had a drink until he was 15, drinking with friends, or going to parties. I think that was really awesome, and that's a big change from the rest of my family.

Sometimes I'd bug my brother about sex stuff for sure. Like I did pranks and stuff. There was one time I did his whole room up in pornography. Every inch of his wall was just covered. I thought he was going to get mad but he didn't want to take it down. I think he was proud of that, actually. My mom didn't think too much of it, though. She thought I was a little shit.

When I kind of reflect back on, you know, what I did with my sister and my brother, we were going out and cooking, cleaning, maybe having some fun. We were just bonding, basically. I learned how to bond with children through my sister and my brother since my mom was too into her thing. I had to do it for her. The stuff that my mom put on my shoulders made me stronger to raise a family. Learning how to cook and clean and make sure

to get the kids to school and make sure I go to school, just the routine things, I guess basically that's what I picked up. It made me more suitable to raise a family at my age. It was almost as though I became man of the house, I basically just had to take over. And I was there for my mom.

I was going through the tough thing at that time. I was sitting on the fence with the wrong crowd. I was gang related for a chunk of my life, and I changed a lot of that stuff. To hell with that stuff. I told my mom that if I finished school and graduated, would she stop doing those kinds of drugs and stuff, and it actually worked out like that, oddly enough. It all worked out pretty good, staying by my mom and helping her work through it. So it's been at least ten, well maybe six or seven years since my mom's done anything like that, she's been sober for a good few years.

I took sex ed in school, and they definitely do teach us about relationships in school. It's called Family Studies, I think. It's actually a really easy course, but they talk about things like relationships, depression, anger, feelings, all that stuff. I think it was in grade seven, eight, or nine. The first time I was wondering, why are you showing me this stuff? Like sore female parts and stuff like that, why are you guys doing this? I don't want to see this, this isn't right! And all the kids are saying that. For the first little while it was useful, but I think it's just on the grounds of expanding your mind basically. Some people just don't care about things like personal hygiene. And then you think about it years down the road, and they're just trying to protect us, right? And to get to the grounds of how you feel about things and how to better yourself, I think that's actually pretty cool for sure. I think that's a good strength in the school system for the kids. Especially in the high school with all the drinking and all

that other stuff, it's definitely good to know. I actually learned a lot from it and it kept me safe.

I think being in a relationship is something that just comes naturally. You be around somebody long enough and they know you, you know each other so much and it just comes naturally. It's just definitely something you feel. And basically what makes a relationship are the differences between men and women. They come together and make one, and solidify the relationship.

Vita, my girlfriend, and I were friends since we were 13 or 14, and now we've been together for about three years. I don't know how it happened, it just sparked off one day that I thought she was someone special, and someone I could be with for most of my life, maybe my whole life. That's how I felt. That's what made me decide I was going to be in a relationship with her.

I was kind of going through a lot of stuff with friends and family, and I just felt like I wanted to be with somebody, to have somebody around all the time that could help me deal with what was on my mind. Around that time, I was drinking with my friends and they weren't the greatest of the crowd. I ran into Vita at the office where she worked, and we've known each other quite awhile. She was always around, she would come over to my place and hang out, or watch movies or play games, this and that. For the longest time we were just friends. So I decided one day that maybe me and Vita should start a relationship.

When we first hooked up, Vita was going through a lot of things as well. So I guess we were fucked up, and in a sense we were both waiting and I guess we both felt like we just

needed each other. I've never actually been with anybody for as long as when I was with her, and we're still here today. I don't know, we're just hitting it off together.

Vita already had two children when we got together, which was a *big* thing for me. That was something completely different for me. I don't know, I didn't really think too much of it. At the time we got together, Vita didn't have her children. She had just had Christa, and she was going through postpartum depression. She had Brigid and Christa on voluntary respite with Social Services or something like that, but the time came that she wanted the kids back. I knew she would have the kids and I knew I'd have to be there for her, because the kids are over everything. I ended up just looking up to them, just falling in love with them, you know?

We struggle quite a bit, too. We were actually struggling for quite a bit during our relationship. We didn't have a home for a long time. So just in the past year things have been finally going through and working out. That should be the mission for the man, just the fact of being around and being there for them, making things for the better most of the time. Just to stay by them.

There have definitely been times when I haven't been sure how to be here. I think that's the times when you have got to be the closest. I feel like there's been times when I've been distanced out and stuff like that, but a lot of the times it's just in my head or in her head, though. I'm not too sure how to explain that, but usually when you feel like you can't go on with the relationship or whatever, that is the most crucial time to be there for each other. I don't know, not so much just to prove it, but just to be together. And that's the point of the relationship in the first place is to work that stuff out. That's what makes it stronger, really, to

pull through and come back again. And if it happens again, you've done it, the relationship is stronger. You know, you pull through, basically.

A lot of this is really about being comfortable about raising a family and being a family. I'd have to say all the different things I've learned have been just from taking care of my sister and brother, and that sense of being there for them. And from being with Vita's kids. From that, I don't know, I just came natural to be a parent. Seeing Christa grow up, that kind of made me feel like she was my own. And what I'm trying to do is just trying to make everything for the better. I'm getting out there and not just making money, but helping cook and clean and all that kind of stuff. What I am trying to do is to do better than my father.

A lot of guys, they don't really want to hang in there and do for the better, especially these days, for sure. Not a lot of my friends are the same as I am. I changed myself a lot. But the kids, I always loved kids. I always just loved kids.

Like with my little brother. I'll always be asking the kids about my brother. You know, is he smoking pot? Is he drinking? Stuff like that. I'm sure he knows I'm checking up on him, but it's not something that he's really brought up or anything. I am actually really proud of him, you know? Really proud of him. I always hear about how good that kid's doing. And I was really proud to hear my brother didn't go through the same cycle of drinking and stuff. Especially since I know so many of his friends that are hanging out with my friends. I'm glad he didn't end up like that, for sure.

Now my brother is starting to see what this is like, being a father. He's starting to see because I just had my own child, my own son. And he's seeing that and I think he's trying to actually learn some of those same things. We talk about it sometimes, and his girlfriend talks

to Vita. I guess he might be the only person I actually talk to about relationship stuff is my brother.

Being a father, it's just a gain of responsibility, really. It's different for a lot of guys. I guess it depends on the man himself, what they feel about their family and what they wish about their family. But I think it's important just to do either what your father did or better. Building a strong relationship and having kids is really important. Make the best of parenting that you can.

With kids, especially nowadays, as soon as they get to grade 7 or to high school, they're smoking cigarettes, doing the dope, you know. The drinking thing, it usually ends up affecting them so bad they don't end up going anywhere. They stay stuck in a sense. Then they're like Ministry kids, they just look forward to getting their monthly check and doing the same thing. I really hope my kids break the cycle, the chain. A lot of stuff in my family isn't so great. So I really hope to provide stuff that I never had for them. And I hope to change how they look at stuff. I hope they pursue what they want to get, what they want to do with themselves.

When I think about my kids in the future, it's really hopeful and wishful. It's pretty much like a dream, I guess I would say. That's what it is.

With relationships, I don't really express too much with my children. I don't think they understand it too well, the boy and girl thing. Sometimes I see parents talking with their kids about that stuff on TV and it's like, oh God. But I'm definitely going to have to teach them the different things that can happen out there. There are diseases out there you don't want to catch. I'm definitely going to have to be the one to teach them, for sure. There are

really just so many diseases that really affect not only just your life, but your kids' life, too. There's a chance that it can get passed on to your kids. I kind of hope the school helps me out with that one a little bit, with sex ed. But I can imagine it, I can see that coming up with them. It's definitely different teaching for sons and daughters, because they're definitely different. You've got to teach a man how to be a man and a woman has to be taught how to be a woman, basically. In high school especially, females and males are different. Its puberty, I guess that's different. Not completely freakishly different, it's just that the way their mind works I guess is just different. Girls hang out with girls and guys hang out with guys. Boys and girls, you know. There's certain differences, that's for sure.

Any kid really when they get into the relationship thing they kind of distance themselves a little more. They're out of the house a little more, they want to be independent, I guess. Those are the kinds of things that I will watch for with my kids. Maybe they will just be spending time with one single person a lot of the time. Those would be some of the signs, especially with the two girls, I could see that coming. Hm, that's probably going to be tough, I didn't think about it until now! I'll have to keep my eye on them! But I think when they start getting gains of independence, that's when they're getting serious with a guy.

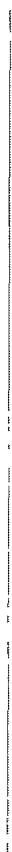
I really hope that my son will be the kind of dad I am. I think he will. I mean, things happen, but I really hope that he does take a few things up from me. But you never know, right? I think for guys, the gain of independence is just a sense of, what's the word? Being needed, I guess, like a sense of providing. Just trying to make things better, basically.

And that's it, really. Change the cycle. I hope that for my children. Break out of the cycle, go to college, get a career, make a life, make a family, a relationship. That's what I'm

trying to show them, make a change for the better. I really want my kids to learn how to be strong and just hang in there. It's pretty tough at times. Really, it gets pretty tough. But I really hope that they can see that they can hang in there, they can accomplish anything that they would want to. Just be determined, keep your head straight, get your mind set on something and grab it. That's what I'm looking for with my kids.

I'm not a good artist, but for my picture I drew this tree for family. I definitely think of everything being like a tree, for sure. And each little branch that is being born is like a child or a new family member. You can grow from small, you grow bigger, you can grow branches out, your life spreads, basically. Through children or your family or whatever you do, you just grow. I would like to find a way to draw in this tree, to bring everything that I talked about into the tree, basically. It would look great. It would look colourful, definitely, and basically full of life. There is no stop and start to family, that's exactly it. There's no end, that's for sure.

Illustration 4: Wood's Family Drawing



Vita

I think back to when I was young and I wasn't allowed to do the things that other children were doing, like playing at the park or spending time at the circus or the fair. All I would do is sit at home and clean and be abused by my mom. My mom was pretty much a party person. She let a lot of bad things happen to me when I was young. There were no boundaries, there was no discipline. There were absolutely no boundaries. My biological family is very distraught, very disturbed. My family taught me how to hate myself a lot. My family doesn't know how to relate to anyone. A very disturbed family.

My mother, she'd just fork over some money and shoo me out the door. God knows what she'd be doing while I'd be gone. She would be really grouchy and sleepy, but she always had money and would always give it to me. She'd give me money to run around the streets with. We were just kids, eight-year-olds running around to the stores and to McDonalds.

I made a decision where I didn't want any part of what my mother was doing. I became a ward of the court. I left that family into a loving, caring, secure foster family that taught me how to love not only myself, but my siblings. My story really started when I was in foster care. I didn't know how to be in a real relationship with anybody until I was a foster child. My foster mom was my spine when I was younger.

I entered into my foster family when I was seven. I was able to sleep in my own room for the first time. I was able to have clean clothes and a dresser for the first time. I actually had a set schedule for each day. I had chores that I enjoyed doing because I wasn't doing *all* the chores. I had set chores, like making sure my bed was made, my teeth were brushed, my

hair combed. I was showered and everything before I left the house. And then once I got back home, I had to do an hour of reading, an hour of homework, and then do my chore, which would probably be vacuuming or dusting. And then it would be dinner time and after dinner it was playtime. My foster family had a pool in the backyard, so that's what I did, and I rode my bike. That was the first time that I had a brand new bike, and that was cool.

My foster mom taught me how to associate with other children nicely, without being rude or obnoxious. And I learned how to play with other kids and how to listen to other people's feelings. Yes, that's where I learned where to act appropriate with other children. My foster family taught me how to be a family and how to participate with my own children.

My foster family would go to the community events and they would spend money on us there. They would buy us stuff and they would get our pictures taken, and get us bracelets to ride around on rides with us. They didn't give us money. Instead, they would participate with us.

I'm thinking what my foster mom did when she wanted to talk to me about, just all the puberty talk. She saw that I was kind of sad and mooney for no reason. She sat down with me and taught me how my body would be changing, and what kind of thoughts would be going through my mind because of puberty and stuff. And she gave me all those weird things, like pads, tampons, bras and stuff like that. I didn't know what they were, and I was thinking, I don't want to do this! So I had a hissy fit, because I didn't want to be a woman. It was fun. I laugh, it was torture.

My foster mom taught me how some people would show affection towards me and how to act appropriate around them. She told me what is inappropriate and what to expect. And what people would try to do and what to say *no* to. And she talked about relationships.

The first time I wanted to hold another boy's hand and draw him pictures and buy him the best chocolate bar at the store, I was probably in grade five. And I told my foster mom about my crush. He wanted to go swimming. He invited me to the pool with my other friend and I wanted to go because I wanted to show my crush my best bathing suit ever. And my foster mom said, okay, we can go to the pool, but I am not picking this boy up. If he wants to see you, he can make his own way there. So I called and said my foster mom said I can go swimming with you, but we can't give you a ride. So he grabbed his bike and rode all the way into town to the pool and I waved at him as I went past. That's when I learned that I can make men make sacrifices for me and they have to earn what they want. That was probably the best lesson that I learned when I was young. I make that work to my advantage to this day.

I also tried making myself more provocative at that age. I wanted people to see me. I wanted the short shorts and the nice tank tops and to show my friends that I was growing boobs. But my foster mom taught me to respect myself and respect my body with the way I dress. She told me if I don't feel comfortable in situations, I can address it. She taught me that wasn't the right way. If somebody wanted to see my body that they weren't allowed. And I wasn't allowed to show my body in any other way. So she taught me, well, *class*.

I wasn't annoyed with her for telling me how to dress. I knew that if she was saying something then it must be true. My foster mom taught me how to love myself.

In school, I wasn't the smartest kid in class, but I wasn't the stupidest. I tried to finish high school, but I didn't. I dropped out of school to have a relationship with the people that were living on the street. Their lives were exactly what I left when I was a child. I went on independent living when I was 15. Then I met my first boyfriend, Nick, and that was my first intimate relationship. That relationship was way too young to be intimate, I was only 15. But I ran away to another town with Nick, and I learned I was pregnant with Brigid, and I had her. I learned I was pregnant again and I had an abortion. And then I learned I was pregnant right after my abortion and that's when Christa came into play. I made two children, my two girls, Brigid and Christa.

Christa wasn't wanted by Nick. So I came back to the Central Interior. I was alone most of the time. I cut myself off from the entire world. I didn't want anyone around me. And I fell into a postpartum depression with my girls and it came to the point where I didn't want my children. So I felt a lot of loss there, because they were babies and I felt I wasn't a good enough person for them.

Now, I've had my children back for a while and my relationship with my kids is probably the one that I would fight for the most. My job is to make sure the house is tidy and the kids are bathed and fed. I try to show my kids how to act with other children, and how to use their manners at the table and stuff. I try to.

Brigid likes to buy gifts for other people. She likes to make gifts. Most of our time is spent around the home after that. She has a birthday in September. It is so much fun, I love planning their birthday parties. This house is full of kids. We have a little table that we make into a birthday table. And we just entertain the children, we play little princess games and

play outside and win prizes. Brigid helps me make goody bags, it's so fun. She doesn't want anything but the best candies in there. So when I'm shopping with Brigid and Christa for their goody bag stuff, I have to be prepared to buy all the good princess clothes and the dress up stuff, the best piñatas, and everything has to match. At the end of the day, we just feel like, what's the word? Satisfied? No, it's better than that. We're still excited and energized and when everybody's gone, we still want to play with everything. Everything is special to Brigid, even it is from the dollar store. She doesn't care. She just wants to colour and use it and play with it and make the guests feel like they did something very special.

And as for me, I like to have fun. I like to have fun with no boundaries. Like when the circus was in town, I took out a \$200 loan and we went to the circus. I bought all the toys that were there. I bought little balloons, and glow in the dark, light up swords and stuff. I didn't realize how much those cost. As soon as we got home, my daughters were re-enacting the circus with the light-up swords. I took off more than I could chew because I didn't know how much the circus cost. I wanted them to get their face painted, I wanted them to go on rides, I wanted them to get treats. I had to pay cab fare. It was a really good day. And I didn't care about the cost, it was so totally worth it. I took off more than I could chew, but I wanted them to get everything.

I will give the kids anything they want to a point. I taught Brigid the value of money and that we don't always have it. When we do have money she can pick out a few things that she'd like to have for her room or for her body. My daughter will say, "I want to go to the store because I think I deserve a Slurpy." And I say, "Well, I don't think you should go to the store because I don't have a toonie for your Slurpy." She says, "Well, we have pop bottles and we can bring those back, mom, and get a Slurpy." I'm thinking, you're willing to do

some work? Okay. My daughters are pretty good with that. Sometimes I'm a pushover, I guess. I let them push me over to a point where they feel comfort, but not to a point where they totally push me over and run me down.

I don't think I'll ever want to have that conversation about intimacy with my daughters. I just always tell my girls to be cautious. And I want to teach my son the same way. I can see the girls trying to be scandalous because of the neighbourhood we live in. But my daughter is pretty good. She already has boys crushing on her.

There is this boy at school that made Brigid a Christmas present. It was a Christmas ornament, it came in an envelope with a bunch of stickers and candy on the card, and it said, Brigid. It looked like there was a lot of time spent into this. She asked me why there was a present made for her like that. And I said, well he wants to be your friend, he wants to show you that you are special to him. So she grabbed out her crayons and a piece of paper and she coloured a picture for him and gave it to him.

I already had that conversation with her, sort of. I told her there are things that boys might want to do with you while you're at school or on the playground. They might want to kiss you, they might want to hold your hand, they might want to do something like kiss your cheek or something. And I said that is not allowed. I said, that time is for adults, and your time is to play, play tag, play hide and seek or red rover or something. I've already started with Brigid. I've told her that if you want a friend you've got to make sure that they treat you with respect, that you can trust them with your toys and they won't get stolen or broken. If a boy likes you, you've got to make sure that he doesn't hurt you, hurt your feelings, or do anything that's inappropriate. I sat down with Brigid and said, these are the things that you're

allowed to do at school: playing, exchanging colours, drawing pictures. You're not allowed to kiss other boys or hug them or anything like that, because that is for adults. And you're not an adult, you're still a baby, to my reasoning. That's when she blushed. She got really red. She just got really red and said, "Okay mom."

Brigid is trouble, for a little girl, she's all about appearance. She likes her lip gloss, she likes all that stuff. She likes her little outfits that have to match. She needs accessories. She's very much a diva. I have a diva for a child.

I think grade 5 is too young for kids to hold hands, that was the age when I started to have little crushes. But then again, those are the emotions that come up at that age. That is the state of mind. Brigid will probably want to go on dates and to hold somebody else's hand.

I think the talk will be confusing for her. I think the talk is most likely just going to happen. It will be uncomfortable for me, because I know that she would be growing up and she would want to do things that she shouldn't be doing at that age. No, I'm not ready for that. My boyfriend, Wood, and I try talking about it, but we just blush and get uncomfortable.

With my son, I'm leaving that talk to Wood. But I don't think he's going to want to talk to Wood, he's a little mommy's boy. My son and I like to sleep together. He just doesn't want to move. He'll look back and kick Wood, looking like, this is *my* mom. Wood gets frustrated because my son's relationship with me is more of what Wood wants. Wood is just there to play with him and to keep him entertained. Wood says he feels just like entertainment. But my son gets pissed off and pretty angry with his dad when I'm not there.

I do want, actually, to teach my son how to respect a woman, and how a woman would be respected is exactly how a man would want to be respected, with love and care and respect. Because if you don't respect a woman, don't expect a woman to respect you back.

There are trust issues. I don't know how to teach my children how to trust. I have trust issues of my own. It's a big scandal out there, in the neighbourhood.

When I came back to the Central Interior, I was 19 and I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any source of income and I was on social assistance. I was introduced to the women's shelter because I didn't have a home. They helped me get my own home again, and I thought my relationship with the people at the shelter was secure. I felt a lot of security and a lot of help, and emotional help. When I was just about to give birth to Christa they helped me find my own home. I got my first apartment and I was so happy about it. Most people like to come here to visit. It feels homey and open. I'm surprised nobody's walked in yet! Even if we don't get the dishes done or clean up the house when we should, we still feel clean at least. Even the way I have a set schedule or organization, it feels at home.

Nick, the father of my girls, he tried breaking me. I was the one who had to get the home and get stuff for my home and get it together. I had to clothe us, and feed us, do this and do that. He was the one with the money and he could spend it on whatever he wanted to. In my relationship with Nick, we didn't eat at the table together, it was just me and the kids. Nick would be out spending his money on whatever he wanted, probably going out and eating, to the bar, doing whatever he wants, sleeping wherever he wants. He tried taking away all my friendships and all my friends by sleeping with them. It was just me and Brigid and my pregnant belly.

With this relationship with Wood, I'd have to say that it feels more like a family. It feels more secure and I feel safe getting mad at Wood for certain things. I feel, what's the word? It's like security. And love, is a really strong one. And trust. When I met Wood, I was dealing with the postpartum depression. He let me lean on him. He gave me a place to stay, a place to live. I've known Wood since I was 13, and he's been my best friend throughout my whole entire teenage life. He is the spine of our family. He keeps us all together and secure and he makes sure we have food on the table and clothes on our backs. He is the ball and chain.

With Wood it is a mutual relationship, where we both went out and did stuff together to get what we needed. We furnished our home to make our home feel comfortable and make sure there's food in our fridge and in our cupboards, to make sure we have the proper utensils to cook it and feel at home. He was wanting to actually sit down at 5pm to eat dinner with me and my kids. Wood comes straight home after work, eats with us, takes a shower, spends some time with the kids, and participates. We have our own time.

I chose Wood because he knew how to love a woman the way a woman should be loved, with respect and caring. He respects what I want. He wanted a son so bad, and then it just happened. When he found out that I was pregnant, no matter how hormonal or crazy I got he still stood by me, and still fought it out and still talked it out.

I taught Wood to dress, though! Before we were going out I let him do whatever he wanted. He'd wear his pants all the way down to his knees, and I said, "That's just preposterous." And he said, "What do you suggest?" And I said, "How about wearing your pants on your hips? Where they're supposed to be." It's funny. But he quit drinking, he quit

hanging out with some of his friends that are a little crazy. He put himself at that distance for me, to be with me and to make a baby. Mistakes that I made with my first partner, I am trying to fix them with my second partner.

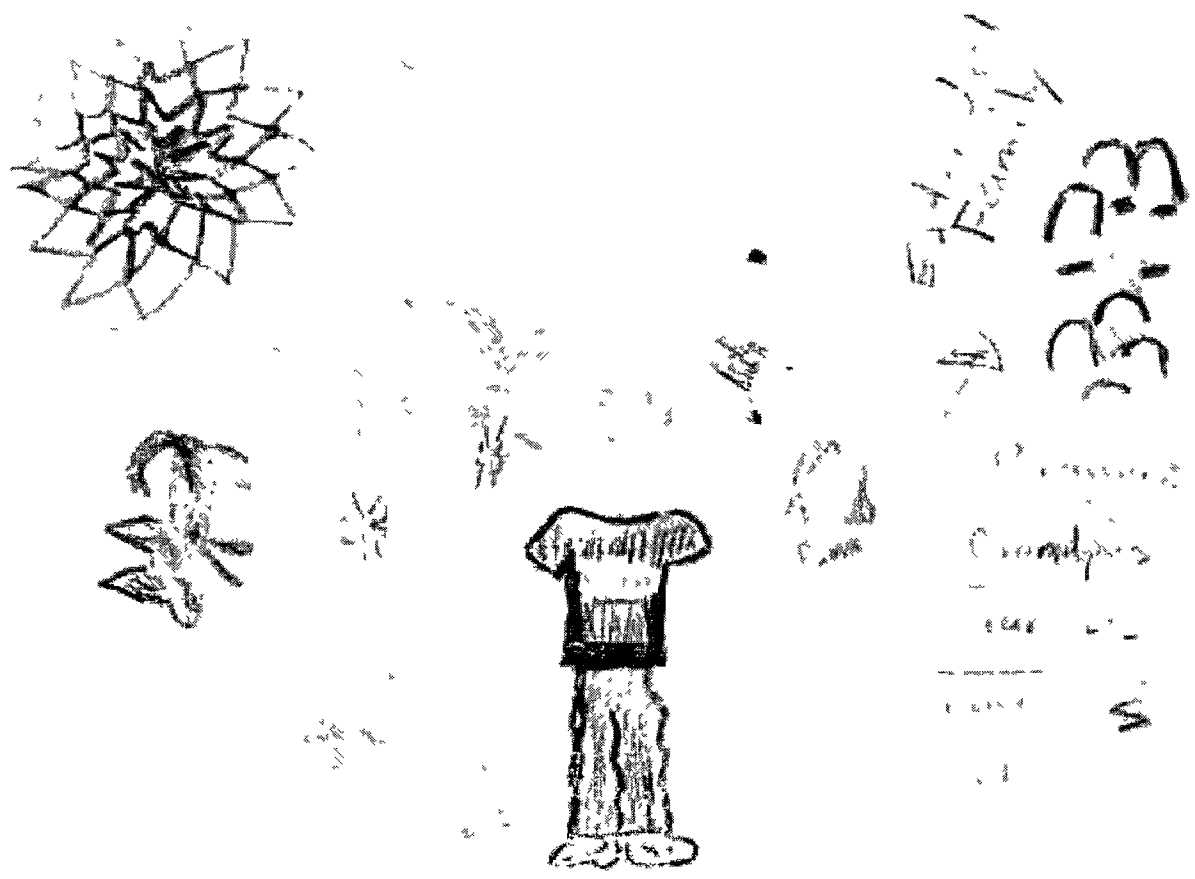
I felt we weren't complete with three children and us until we had these little pet animal additions to our family. The dogs are like our children's children. Our animals are spoiled. They get to do all the cuddly things, and the girls playing with them or torturing them, whatever. There are four of them so each of our children has one to pack around. One of our cats let's Brigid stroll her around in a little stroller. They sleep together and stuff, that's when the animals come into play. To make us feel special and to cuddle. We're a pretty cuddly family. We like to cuddle, we like to go for little nature walks. Our relationship in this whole entire house is pretty laid back. And Wood and I, we just keep our relationship strong for our kids.

Then there is the extended. The Grandmas are the hugest role. Wood's mom and my foster mom, they play huge roles. They're the people that we turn to when we need the help, because we don't always know what to do with the children. I can trust the Grandmas completely with my children and my animals as well. They are the people that we turn to when we need it, and we're not afraid of asking them because they won't turn us down. The Grandpas come second. They're not always in the picture, but when they are, they show the most affection towards our children and think they are cute. The Aunties like to buy everything, because they don't have children and they think it's cute that they can buy cute little outfits for their nieces and nephew. My uncles, they come into town and give us their little gifts. My Uncle likes to let me have my down time. He takes me to the casino to play late night bingo and have four hours just by myself, no kids, no boyfriend. I sit down alone

and concentrate. And my cousins, they're just entertainment for the kids. They're not necessarily the babysitting type, but they'll play while we're here and do everything while we're here. It's just once we leave that's when they are in a panic. So we don't leave them.

I think my family story is similar to other people that grew up that were also wards of the court. But most of my friends are scandalous. They don't look for a man for love, they look for a man for money. I'm one of the women that are least scandalous. I decided I wanted love. When I look at my family story, I see we're all pretty webbed. How do you describe a web? When I draw it, it looks like a dreamcatcher, doesn't it? I look at this, and I want a tattoo of a web now. We've got a bit web.

Illustration 5: Vita's Family Drawing



Uma

This is a weird bunch of questions, but I will just go along with it. I guess I have problems letting people close to me, and I don't really know how to talk without getting mad. Maybe because when I was a kid, things were different. Kids don't normally go through what I went through, and they shouldn't, because that's not good. I had a lot of bad things happen to me when I was a kid. I just had bad problems. Yeah, it wasn't good. I was beaten up a lot as a kid, and not by other kids either. So that's why I am so protective of myself. I didn't want people to come near me or come in my life. I never learned how to be in any kind of relationship. No one ever told me through my whole life. I just had problems.

My real mom is dead. I lived with my grandma, and I call her "mom." And I call my grandpa "dad." My grandparents, Mom and Dad, they took me in and I was real young. Mom raised her kids in the bush. She had 15 kids. Mom and Dad, they were really old. People didn't understand why I was there and why they took care of me. I think people think parents shouldn't be so old.

Mom never told me about relationships or sex. Nobody ever talked about it with me, so I didn't really know anything. Mom and Dad thought, you don't tell her, she's not going to know, so she won't have sex. And Dad was very adamant that no boys were allowed in the house. Not for any reason. He'd be like, "Go out of my house! You're not even allowed to set foot in my house!" Yeah, my dad was very strict about boys. Even if boys were about to pee their pants, Dad would say, "You can do it outside." It could be 100 below and he'd be like, "Go home." I would say, "Dad! God! That's my friend!" And he's like, "Not your friend." Sometimes boys would come to my house and Dad would answer the door. He

would open the door and I would be standing there in the kitchen. Boys would say, “Is Uma here?” No. Shut the door. I’d be standing there watching.

Girls were allowed, my brothers girlfriends, but not my boyfriends. I don’t know why.

But Dad was always a good dad and he took good care of me. He walked me to school every day, even when I didn’t want him to. He made sure I always had food, he cooked for me, he cleaned up for me. Dad carried me around until I was four years old.

I had Dad, my grandpa, but I always knew he wasn’t my real dad. I knew he was my dad that took care of me and loved me but I knew he wasn’t my real dad. People always looked at him really weird when I would say “Dad!” because he was so old. He was really old to be carrying me around. I mean, pretty old to be still carrying around a kid.

I am the oddball of my family. Everyone in my family is really, really tall and I am short. Everyone notices me because of this. No one in the family knows who my real dad is. I guess I don’t really fit in with everyone.

But Dad told me he loved me every day, and I tell my kids that every day. That is something I learned from him. Dad, he was really good. A really good man. He died when I was 11. Maybe that’s why I have such issues with men. That’s what started all the drinking and stuff. It is really hard.

Even though people told me not to drink, I still did. I drank a lot. Like, *a lot*. I just preferred to drink all the time.

I didn’t change until I got pregnant. I got pregnant, and I didn’t want to hurt the baby and so I quit. I am FASⁱⁱ and I didn’t want my baby to have that. I was just like, I am *not*

going to hurt my baby. When I got pregnant I got really emotional and angry. I know I missed out on fun stuff. I got to do a lot of dumb stuff, just not all of it, because I got pregnant so young. But I don't want my kids to have a drunk for a mom. Being a mom makes everything harder, having to finish school and have kids all at the same time. And also trying to find a job and all that. Everything is harder and there are many more pressures.

My friend just walked out on her kids and left them with their dad. She just walked out on her kids. She doesn't talk to them on their birthday, or Christmas, and she didn't buy them nothing. She talks to them on occasion, but still, I am thinking, how can you do that to your own kid?

Before Ellie, my oldest daughter, was born, I lived with my cousin. My cousin had a baby and her baby's dad left two weeks after she was born. So I helped her a lot with that. She would wake me up at like six or seven in the morning and say, "Uma, here's the baby. I'm going to make something to eat and smoke and I'll be back." And the baby would just be sitting there, hitting me, playing with me. And I changed her, but I never changed her when she was poopy. I didn't do that. But sometimes I would take care of her when no one else was around. I took her for walks, fed her, and changed her. So by the time Ellie came around I was already aware of what was going to happen.

I had no support from my family with Ellie. That's hard. I think some parts of my life are similar and common to other moms, but other parts aren't. Like, I know a lot of moms whose baby's dads don't do that much. I know that's the way it is, but it shouldn't be. I'm just waiting around until it gets better. Dads, even if they don't like their job, they should keep it just to support their family. Ellie's dad, Matthew, is out gallivanting, having his

teenage life, while I'm at home with a baby. And now what he does all the time is sleep and sleep.

Matthew was completely different before I was pregnant. He used to chase me around, in a good way. And all the sudden I got pregnant and that was over. I guess boyfriends change after they get in the relationship. I don't know. I guess we didn't really know each other that well. He didn't seem too happy when I got pregnant and when I stopped drinking. When I was drinking, he got more of what he wanted. He says cuddling makes a better girlfriend. I'm not really that girl that loves to hug and cuddle. I don't like to cuddle that much. Sometimes, but not all the time. Most girls do but I don't. Matthew says lots of girls like to do this, and I'm like, I don't like to. I don't know how to be a very good girlfriend.

A lot of men think that women should take care of the kids and stay at home. I don't want to be a stay at home mom. Like, I go to school and everything, and I plan to go to college. I love going outside. I go for walks. Not all the time, but on a nice day, when it's not all crazy hot. I would rather go for a walk than just hang around or cuddle or sleep.

Matthew and me, we're almost the same colour in the picture I drew, because we are kind of the same but kind of different. I seem to always let things go and he seems to always hold on to them.

The best advice I ever got was from Mom. She said the best way to raise your children is your way. It is really odd, because I understand it now but back then I was like, I don't get it! But to be a parent, it was rough at first with Ellie. Mom just told me , "It's going to hurt

like hell,” and it did. My labour lasted forever with her, and it would not end. It was the endless labour. I thought I was dying.

The weird thing is, they told me I was going to lose Ellie when I was pregnant with her, more than once. And then they lost her heartbeat when I was in labour with her. She was going into distress and whatnot. And SIDS always scared me, too. Two weeks after she was born, Matthew’s mom took her while we went to the movies and the whole time I was thinking about her. I didn’t want to leave her with anybody else. I didn’t really want to, and I didn’t really trust anybody to watch her, not even her dad.

Me and Ellie spend a lot of time together. Ellie always wants to play and do stuff. She always says, “I want to play.” She is supposed to be in daycare today but I didn’t have her lunch ready, so she’s staying at home.

I don’t regret Ellie. I just wish she would have come at a later time. I was only 16 when I had her. And I did a lot of it by myself for a long time.

Ellie is a good big sister. When I got pregnant again with Annie, my family was like, I can’t believe you are going to have another baby with Matthew. They didn’t want me to have another baby with him. They said, not a good idea. Then they said, you are going to have a terrible time because Ellie is so attached to you and now you’re going to have another baby. But Ellie’s good to Annie.

I am always carrying Annie. She is beautiful, but she always cries and screams. That’s all she does. She’s like that most of the day.

I was just telling Mom how annoyed I was of everyone telling me how to raise my kids. It just pisses me off when people do that. It gets under my skin and I'm thinking, why don't you shut up? It's not really any of your business how I raise my kids. There are people that try to tell me how to do it. I hate it when people are like, "You're supposed to do it like this," and I don't like that. I don't have to do anything. Well, anyway it's my choice.

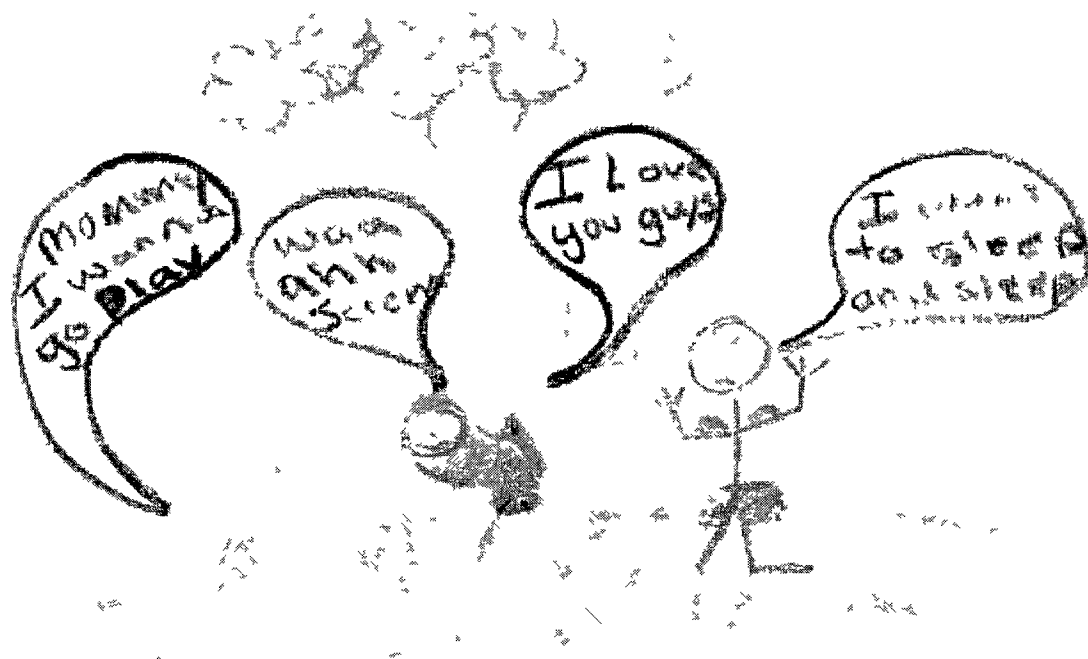
I am going to talk to them about sex. I'm not going to be like my mom and think if I don't tell them it's not going to happen. I don't think they're not going to kiss boys. Or girls, I don't know. That doesn't really bother me, just goofing around, that doesn't really bug me. If they have a boyfriend when they are like 11 or 12, whatever. I did the same thing, I can't judge them. And they can spend the night at their friend's houses.

But they are *not* getting pregnant. I am not being a grandma. When they start having sex, I'll care. They are not allowed to spend the night at boy's houses. They will not bring boys to the house. And if they tell me, yes, I want to start having sex with people, I'm going to give them birth control and whatever.

The only thing I don't want them to copy from me is thinking they can have a baby when they're 16. That is no good. I want them to have that teenage life. I want them to have their teenage-hood before they have babies. I don't want that for them, to copy from me. As long as they got their teenage-hood and got a chance to do all the dumb stuff, like go to school, sort their life out without kids on their hands. I don't want my daughters to think because I got pregnant young that they think it's okay. I don't want them to think, "Oh, you did it." That is not good.

If my daughters had kids maybe when they were 19 or 20, I'd think that is okay. Fine. And after they're done high school, they don't really have to go to college, but that's an option. I can't wait for my kids to grow older. I just hope for them. I just want my kids to be happy and healthy. I just want them to be happy. And even though I don't say it all the time, this is how I feel. I love these guys.

Illustration 6· Uma's Family Drawing



Chapter Five- Within and Across Participant Analysis

This analysis of the research evolved through my layered review of the data, as I presented in detail in Chapter Three. This chapter introduces themes that arose with individual participants as they shared their story, and themes that I interpreted as being present across all of the stories, with direct quotes from participant transcripts to illustrate the theme. Direct quotes are in italics within the paragraphs. I have also included discussion on participant drawings as they occurred within the interview. I did not analyse participant drawings, but rather have discussed here what the participants said about their families during and after creating the picture. Following each individual participant analysis is the concept map that I created to develop themes and discussion. I also introduce the across-participant themes that emerged through the analysis process described in Chapter Three.

In Chapter One I introduced the term *sexual health*, and discussed previous research defining sexual health relative to positive outcomes such as pleasure and intimacy, and negative outcomes such as unintended pregnancy, STIs and false beliefs. Participants in this project were free to interpret sexual health in relation to family stories in their own ways. The analysis that I present here includes my explanation of how sexual health is enacted for these participants, including my perceptions of how they define sexual health. The individual interpretations of sexual health explored by participants makes up a response to the research question asking how these stories *matter* for sexuality and relationship health.

The themes presented here represent participant responses to the research question: What are family stories of sexuality and how do these stories matter for sexual health and relationships?

Across-Participant Analysis: Meta-Themes

There are three over-arching themes found in all of the participants' experiences of family stories and how they exchanged information about sexuality and health: 1) experiential nature of relationships (relationships are learned by *doing*); 2) hope (the existence of hope); and 3) relevance of context (the unique situational contexts within families). Within the theme of unique situational context, two sub-themes emerged, and these are the relevance of the individual characteristics of family members, and also the presence of reflections on upbringing and their own sexual health education.

Experiential nature of relationships. All of the parents in this study noted that their knowledge of how to be in a relationship came with practice, and that this influenced how sexual health was both taught and learned within their families. Wood suggested that sexuality and relationship health is not taught or learned, but rather *"it's something that just comes naturally. You be around somebody long enough and they know you so much, or you know each other so much I should say."* Vita agreed, adding that there is an element of trial that goes along with the experience of learning sexuality and relationship health, indicating a partner that *"stood by me and still fought it out and still talked it out."* Uma took a similar tone, declaring that sexuality and relationship health has never been taught to her and she is still uncertain about these topics. *"I never learned how to be in any kind of relationship. No one ever told me through my life...I still don't, I don't know how to be a very good girlfriend."*

Xia said that she isn't sure if she learned sexual health from her family or her life experiences, but *"thinks it's a contribution of all those factors, and the fact that I don't want the kids to have to make the same mistakes."* She also adds that her experiences in life caused

her to be “*more educated about certain things, just what resources are out there.*” Zabrina sums these ideas up nicely: “*Unfortunately parenting doesn’t come with a manual. You just do your best for your kids and hope that they become the best that they can.*”

Hope. All of the participants indicated in one way or another that they were very hopeful that their children would be successful when navigating developing sexual health and relationships. Uma hopes for her children “*to have their teenage-hood before they have babies.*” Xia, also reflecting on her own history, said “*if I can keep all that stuff out of their face and them not have to deal with it, but know that it’s there, then as a parent I’m doing my job.*” Wood adds that he hopes his children “*can see they can hang in there, they can accomplish anything that they would want to...make a life, make a family, a relationship, that’s what I’m trying to show them.*”

Relevance of context. Although participants in this study did not suggest that their experience teaching and learning specifically about sexual health and relationships was unique, all of the participants felt that their family stories were unique. Zabrina observed that her own actions and attitudes toward both parenting and sexual health have changed over time, and she laughingly adds that “*whatever I’m doing with my children at this point in my life I feel like it’s the best way and everyone should want to do it.*” Xia notes that “*your situations make your diversity, and if somebody hasn’t necessarily walked in your shoes*” that the contextual experiences make for different family interactions. Wood says “*I’ve had some conversations with some of the guys about these kinds of things you know, drinking [and] talking, but no, I think it is definitely different, being in the free country that it is. It is definitely different for a lot of people.*”

Individual characteristics of family members. One facet of individual context that came up often when parents reflected on sexual health education in their families was the importance of the unique characteristics of individual family members that influenced the timing and the content of sexual health discussions. Xia indicated that sexual health exchanges differed between her daughters, reflecting that her younger daughter “*is a completely different child...[she] is five years younger than her sister, but acts like she’s the same age as her sister. Maturity wise, she’s a lot more advanced in her thought process.*” Her perception of their individual maturity and understanding of sexual health material influenced her sexual health interactions with her daughters.

Zabrina suggested that historical interactions differed with her children, and that influenced the exchange of sexual health information. She related a story of conflict within the family, which resulted in different methods of communicating. “[*My youngest son] has never had a problem respecting me, whereas [my elder son] has.*” This influenced how information exchanges were perceived and responded upon between Zabrina and her sons, and also influenced which topics she felt comfortable raising.

Wood added that he is likely to exchange sexual health information differently for his daughters than for his son because “*females and males...are definitely different...not that they’re completely freakishly different, it’s just that the way their mind works I guess is just different.*”

Reflection on upbringing. Another story-line within the main theme of unique context included the participants’ reflections on their upbringing, both specific to how sexual health was discussed in the family and also how relationships were managed overall. Uma recalls

how her own father handled her emerging sexuality in a way she describes as *“Adamant: boys, even if they were about to pee their pants, my dad was like, you can do it outside, you’re not allowed in the house.”* She planned to take the same approach with her own daughters.

Conversely, Zabrina suggests that her own parenting related to sexuality *“took a big swing from totally, you know, just suppressed to being way on the other side of things,”* noting that she has parented related to sexual health in a different way than that in which she was raised.

Xia adds that her parenting in relation to her mother’s is less specific to sexual health, but more as a general personality characteristic. She feels as a parent she needs *“to be very consistent, where my mom’s more a jellyfish: she doesn’t want to deal with it, so don’t rock the boat, and I turned completely opposite of that.”* Wood also reflects on his overall parenting, saying *“what I’m trying to do is to do better than my father.”*

Zabrina’s Analysis and Theme

*“We’re not dysfunctional. If we are everyone is. In fact the less dysfunctional a family tends to look the more they are and they’re just hiding it, which makes them more f*cked up than the rest of us.”*

Zabrina’s Drawing and Concept Map. Zabrina began her family drawing (Illustration 1) by saying *“Since I am a diva Leo, I am going to start with me.”* This suited her style of story-telling, where she has situated her own developing sexual self in relation to the sexual development of her children. While drawing, she discussed some of the physical characteristics of her children, adding physical characteristics that had been passed on to her children from her mother. Notably, she mentioned that her children *“tower over her”* because

of their size, which coincides with points in her story where she mentions that her children “*gang up on her.*”

Zabrina goes on to describe the personality characteristics of her children and how that influences the way that the family relates to each other. She describes Brenda as being “*one of my very best friends*” and describes Daniel as being “*very peaceful and very gentle,*” adding that they share a sense of humour and that he enjoys cooking for Zabrina. She goes on to describe Cale’s ability to “*see deeper emotionally*” and his ability to be “*communicative*” with his eyes. Her description of familial relationships continued throughout the drawing to include her relationships with her extended family, including her ex-partner and his wife and child. A unique element that Zabrina added to her drawing was that of musical instruments, saying that her children play music together. She described their musical styles, and that the three of them complement each other musically and often perform together.

Although she did not include them in the drawing, Zabrina used the drawing activity to describe the characteristics of her own parents and step-parents, including the relationships that she held with her father’s girlfriends over time and how they have played different roles throughout her life. She added that she would “*have a hard time incorporating my dad without*” his former partners, expressing the relevance of the extended family members in her family story.

The drawing activity added important relational elements to Zabrina’s story that did not emerge during the narrative, especially specific unique characteristics of her children that influence how she relates to them. Although her story included elements of the individuality of her children, the drawing activity seemed to allow her to define what those unique

individual elements actually were. In this final piece of work she gives very specific details on how individually her children are very different from each other, and thus relate to her in very different ways. This became a part of my analysis of Zabrina's story, as the ideas about sexuality and relationships in her family have been shaped by the individual interactions and characteristics of the family members.

Zabrina's story incorporates much of her past, and she is also clear that she is still developing as a sexual being. I depicted this in the concept map by showing how the ideas about sexuality and relationship health in Zabrina's family are dynamic, all-encompassing, with each story influencing the others. Zabrina and her children are in a dialogue about what sexuality and relationship health means. They have very different ideas about this, and in her story Zabrina does not admit to much overlap between her own life stories and how that influences her children's sexuality. Zabrina herself has been greatly influenced by her past experiences, particularly the influence of her early pregnancy and the influence of the church. This is indicated in the concept map with a cluster of circles connecting to Zabrina. The family's ideas about sexuality and relationship health are noted within the larger circle, which influence each other but perhaps do not overlap.

Focusing on her own developing sexual health. I identified one main theme within Zabrina's narrative related to how her family teaches and learns about sexual health, and that is *the focus on her own developing sexual self*. Underlying this main theme is her desire for others to learn from her past, especially when she feels she has made mistakes. When I began my session with Zabrina and asked her the research question, she responded by asking whether I was interested in hearing about how she learns about sexual health or how her children learn about the topic. Zabrina openly acknowledged that she is currently working

through her own expressions of her sexual self and that her children are a reflective part of this process. For her, educating her children is about being honest with them about her sexual development. *“I have been rather promiscuous, and that really puts a deterrent on them. They go, ‘I don’t want to do that. It’s made them really cautious and they’re quite a bit smarter than their mother, which I think is great. I mean, I’m sorry that I had to be the bad example, but I was also very open about telling them times when I had made mistakes.”* She goes on to describe her *“pattern of affairs, and that’s what I mean by mistakes. Instead of dealing with things with my spouse or my partner in a head-on matter the way that I’ve tended to deal with it is by running to someone else on the side...It’s so hurtful, it’s such emotional turmoil for everyone concerned...I love too much, that’s the problem. And I realize that I very rarely can have sex without caring about somebody. And so I give pieces of my soul all over the place, and then I’m spread so thin and feeling so much emotion all over the place”*

Zabrina discusses how her children are able to reflect on her life because she talks openly with them about it, and even listens to their reflections on her sexual expressions. *“I realized how it was affecting them...when Daniel said to me, I don’t like seeing your bedroom door and wondering who’s shoes are outside it. And he doesn’t say a lot of things, he’s not a talker, so when he says something it’s usually something that hits home like that. And that’s when I was like, okay I can’t bring home any more randoms around them. I mean I shouldn’t have sex with randoms anyway because it’s destructive to myself...but I think seeing my mistakes has really influenced their sex lives.”* She adds *“I always tell them that...just remember I’m a person and I sometimes make mistakes, too...they need to know that it’s okay to make mistakes as an ‘authority.’ It’s okay to say, I screwed up, I’m sorry.”*

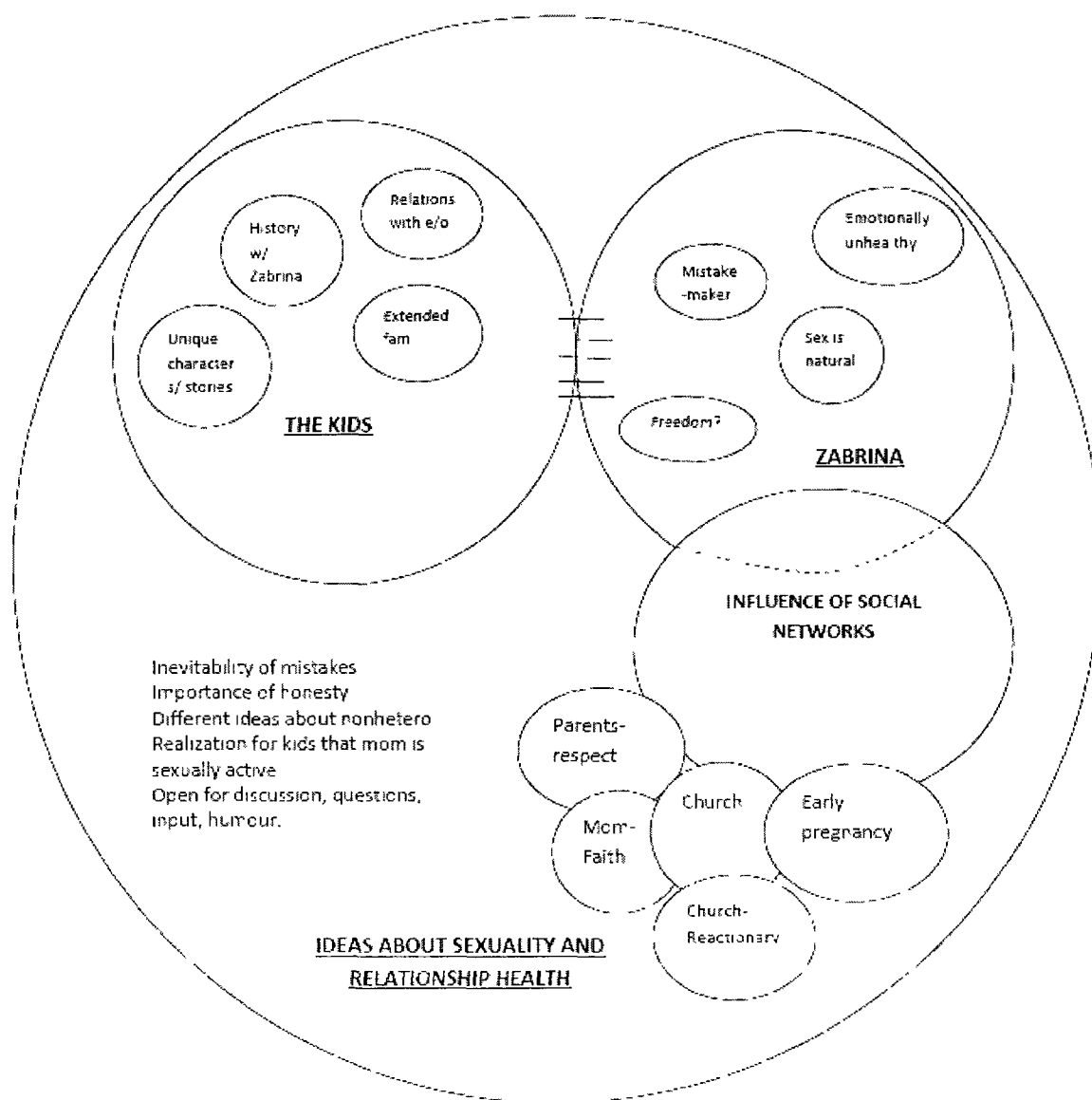
Zabrina also wants to offer her children the sexual health education that she lacked, resulting in her experience as a young parent and also her experiences with suppressing aspects of her sexuality. She feels that her early pregnancy *“brought all my hopes and dreams to a grinding halt...the reason I’m not a professional...is I had my children first.”* About her developing sexuality, she adds, *“I was feeling all these guilt feelings for being a human like wanting to have sex and being bisexual and I just started to realize I’m not gonna deny my humanity anymore...I really wanted to be who I am, and find a different basis for the morals and everything.”* About her own upbringing, she also notes that her *“mom did things that she wasn’t proud of and that she felt were mistakes, but often she didn’t tell us about it or tell me...I mean some of the things I found out later about my parents, I thought well if I had known that I wouldn’t have felt that you were such a fuddy-duddy, just let me see that...and [mom] says, oh it just didn’t seem right.”*

Zabrina defines sexual health as something dynamic, acknowledging that her community, her values, and her actions have changed through time. Through her story and her ideas about sexual health, negative health outcomes include unintended pregnancy, such as she experienced, but also behaviours that she describes as *“self-destructive”* and giving *“pieces of my soul all over the place.”* Positive sexuality and relationship health for her includes ongoing self-reflection and healthy relationships in the future.

Zabrina holds hope, not just for the future of her children, but her own developing sexual health and relationship health. *“It’s funny, I talk so much about being honest but I’ve had all these affairs but I’m trying to break that, and trying to make sure that I don’t repeat those patterns. The next time I’m in a love relationship I want to last the rest of my life...but*

right now I'm just not emotionally ready for that. I know that...and I won't do it unless I feel it for real."

Illustration 7: Zabrina's Concept Map



Yovela's Analysis and Theme

"Maybe I'm a little excessive and go beyond the openness but I think every parent should be able to have a good relationship like that."

Yovela's drawing and concept map. *"I love drawing and I love writing."* Yovela shared this with me at the start of her family drawing. She began by drawing her husband, indicating that he was first because *"he's supposed to be the man of the house, supposed to be the provider, the one to make you feel safe"* but followed this by drawing her own self as the *"anchor"* adding that she was going to draw a heart on herself as a symbol of love but changed her mind. The ideas of love and hesitancy at expressing that love, in this case by drawing a heart, were also present in the stories she shared.

She went on to draw her children, beginning with her sons, especially describing their physical characteristics. She described her sons as being physically fit, and drew a "six pack" on one of her sons, describing his enjoyment of keeping his body in shape. This fit with her descriptions of how the family spent time together playing sports, and this is a way that they connect with each other. *"We play...volleyball outside, badminton, that kind of stuff, scrub at the school when the kids are younger."* Conversely, Yovela drew her youngest daughter lying in front of the rest of the family members "sleeping." She even noted that if the family was playing together in a public space, that she would be *"[still sleeping] on the recliners."*

When I asked her to describe the picture, Yovela developed tears in her eyes, saying *"I miss this. They've gotten older...it's hard to adjust to...we all [don't] get together as a family...you know, I really miss the family times."*

I found the concept mapping for Yovela difficult until I addressed her description of herself as the “anchor.” I began to imagine that the concepts were coming from inside Yovela herself, with her children and her ideas inside of her body as though she encapsulated how she storied her family. This idea grew into a clearer picture of her expectations about what relationship means, and that through descriptions of openness, humour, and connected family communication sexual health dialogue is embedded.

Connection as expectation. The main theme that emerged through review of Yovela’s stories, drawing, and concept map is the importance of family connection, and that this encompasses her expectations for relationship. At times, she was explicit in how this translated into exchanges of information related to sexual health. *“I’m always very open and honest with my kids, maybe a little too honest. But I want to know what my kids are doing...I’d much rather know where you are, you’re in a safe environment, you’re not doing it in the back of a car...other people certainly don’t agree with it, but it’s gonna happen sooner or later and I would like to know about it and be able to have that open conversation and communication with them.”* A big part of that connection between her children comes from the use of humour. *“[The kids] and I have the same line of thinking, and if we can turn anything around into a funny sexual thing we will...when there’s time for play I’m right there...if there’s an open liner, I’m there. I’m jumping in.”* She also says, *“I love hanging out with the younger guys...it’s just, I can relate to them, you know, not that I’m old at all, I just love the energy.”* Not only is the connection good for the family exchanging sexual health information, but also good for Yovela in that it supports her comfortable way of being in the family. This is also true of her children’s partners, *“I open the kids relationships into the*

family with open arms...you are somewhat a part of me if you are a part of my child's life. And I like to be right there, to know what's going on."

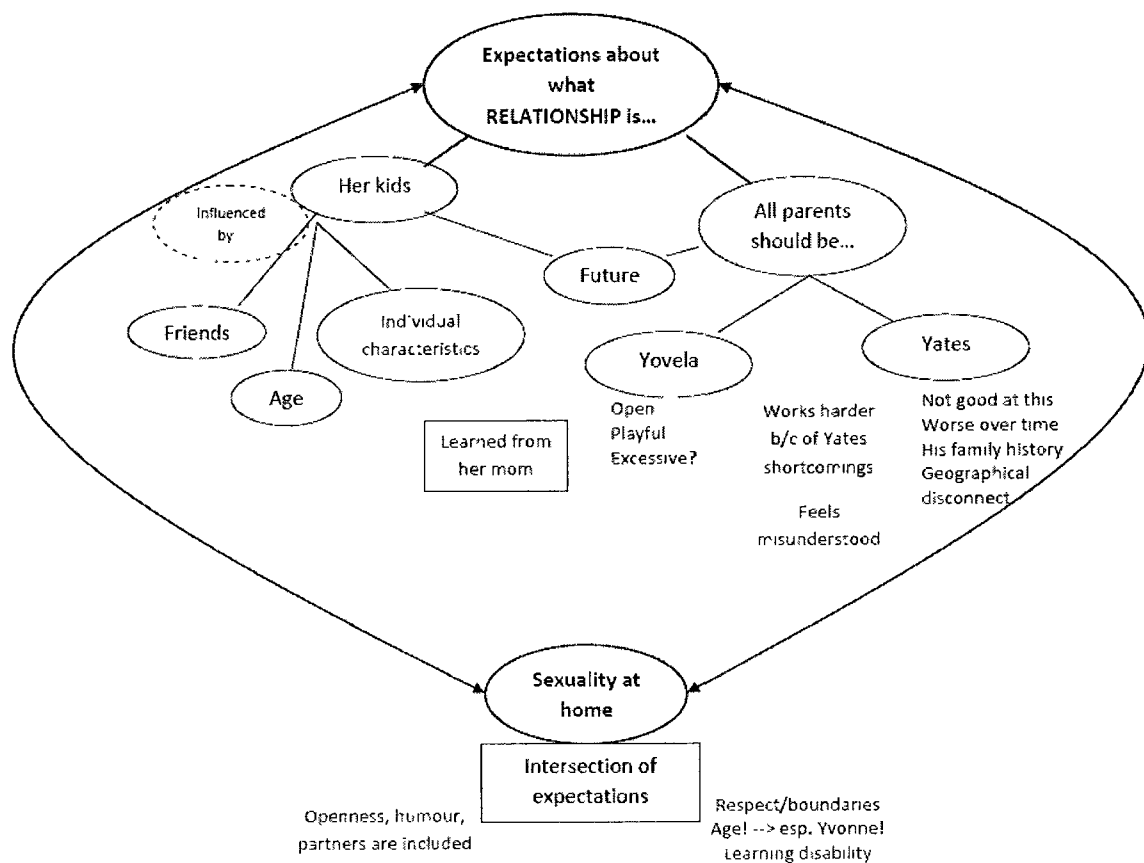
Yovela learned about connection from her mom, who was involved in her life in different ways. *"I remember my mom in grade school, every party that we had, my mom would make this four-tier cake. I'll never forget it, each layer was a different colour, and [other kids would say], Oh, Yovela's mom's cake!"* She feels this is in contrast to her husband who did not learn from his parents and so has a different way of connecting in the family. *"He had a really tough childhood...his mom was very sick...she definitely had her ups and downs...and [Yates] just didn't have the family pull like I did."* She asserts that *"maybe because of his upbringing he doesn't know any different."*

Yovela's definition of sexual health includes expectations of connections and communication. She identifies healthy behaviours specific to this definition, such as questioning her family members directly about sexual activity. She also presents modalities of openness such as playfulness and the use of humour. She describes that this is protective, *"I'd much rather know where you are, you're in a safe environment, you're not doing it in the back of a car."* For her, open communication is a part of positive sexual health outcomes. Unhealthy behaviours also reflect the importance of connection for her, such as the geographical disconnect that she is currently experiencing with her partner and how this influences their relationship.

Part of Yovela's desire for connection is for protecting her kids' health, and she feels other parents might not understand the importance of this openness. *"To me, it's just the norm, like I think every parent should be [open]... You don't want to be known as the Big B*

with their friends, especially at the age of 14 or 15, because you aren't going to know where your kids are."

Illustration 8: Yovela's Concept Map



Xia's Analysis and Theme

"For me, with the background of sexual abuse, it was even more prevalent to be in touch [with my daughters]."

Xia's drawing and concept map. After a fairly long session of story-telling, Xia completed her drawing silently and quickly. She created a quick sketch and then returned the drawing to me, and we immediately discussed a point in her drawing that did not come up during her story-telling session, that of her anticipation that her relationship with her husband would soon be ending and he would soon be living outside of the home. She illustrated this in her drawing by placing him in the driveway. *"He's on the outside because he's gonna be on the outside soon. So he's outside of the house...he's never part of the discussion, like he doesn't participate in the discipline or any of the stuff with the girls...so, yeah, leaving the household."* Although she discussed interactions including her husband in her stories, this is the first indication that she gave that her husband would be leaving their household. She went on to describe her partner's understanding of boundaries, a topic that came up often in her stories, and that this was another reason for him to be in "the outside" in her drawing. She also added that, if she had unlimited amounts of time, she would have drawn her daughters and herself *"driving in a vehicle...just us doing something together, that's our time to really talk and there's nobody around us. There's no [husband] snooping or listening or having to be guarded about what we say."* The drawing activity truly illustrated the desire for boundaries and safety for Xia and her daughters.

In mapping Xia's stories, the filter of sexual abuse through which she views sexual health plays a central role. Her discussions with her daughters about sexual health stemmed

from her concerns about risk and protecting her children from her own experiences with sexual trauma. This topic was the centre of our discussion.

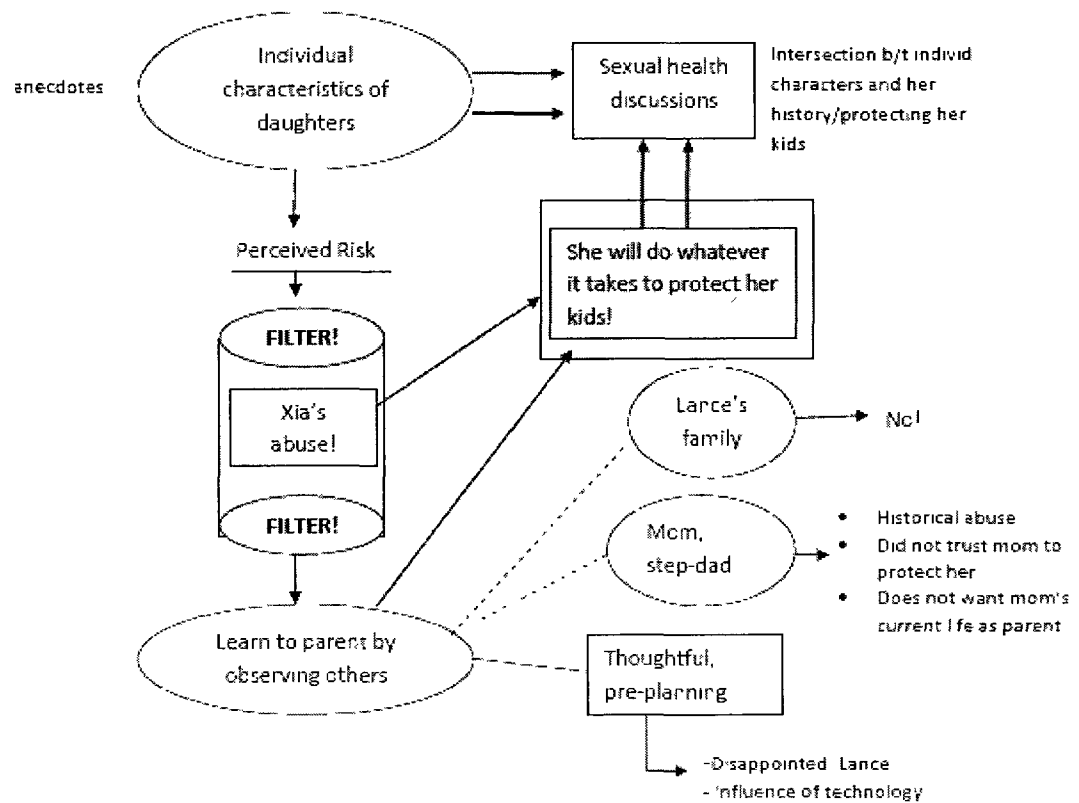
The lens of sexual abuse. The central theme within Xia's story is that of her own history of sexual abuse. This influences her discussions with her daughter, in that sexual health education means protecting her daughters and in some ways preventing their sexuality, and continually negotiating perceived risks around her daughters. She says she is *"hypersensitive about certain issues about men around my kids, who could be around my kids...And worrying, from my past issues with sexual abuse...even with [someone] I trust. You know, my spouse... in the back of my mind, it was, I was always watching. Like it made me uncomfortable if [daughters] would be lying down and he'd go lie down on the bed and talk to her or read her a story. That would make me uncomfortable."*

Over the course of her daughters' maturing and developing sexuality, this protective nature of sexual health education has expanded from in the home to including their social experiences, and the education that her daughters receive from friends, school, and their social lives. *"[Youngest daughter] is 14, she needs to just have fun. She doesn't need to know everything about crystal meth, she doesn't need to know what tweaking means... she doesn't [need to know about] prostitution...And you know she knows all this stuff."* Xia acknowledges her daughter's maturity, but also feels protective of her because of the influence of her friends. *"I don't know if that maturity is always a good thing or a bad thing because my 14 year old is comfortable and can cognitively and maturity-wise interact with 20-some-year olds...I look at it and I go what does a 26-year old have in common with a 14-year old? And it really in some aspects really bothers me. So I'm very conscious with [daughter] to, be inquisitive with her about stuff like that."*

Xia defines sexual health through protection from physical and relational abuse. She also discussed ways that she taught her daughters protection from unintended pregnancy and STIs, especially with her eldest daughter. Xia has identified behaviours that she perceives as risk-related based on her definitions of sexual health, including a “*no fear*” attitude and evaluating trust and boundaries with others. Healthy sexual health outcomes for her include relationships that have been well thought-out and considered for safety.

Xia is consciously questioning the risks of sexual abuse around her daughters, and whether her daughters feel empowered to speak out against sexual advances that are inappropriate. *“Did I instil the right things, or what’s acceptable...what’s her personal space and what she’s allowed...? Being able to give the kids a voice...them knowing what is appropriate, what wasn’t appropriate was very important.”*

Illustration 9: Xia's Concept Map



Wood's Analysis and Theme

"When they're starting getting gains of independence, especially the girls, that's when they're getting serious with a guy."

Wood's drawing and concept map. Wood talked through his drawing by first conceptualizing his ideas about family and story as a tree. He described *"each little branch that is being born is like a kid, or a new family member...what I'm trying to show here, family is really like a tree...you can grow from small, you can grow branches out, your life spreads basically, through children or your family or whatever you do, you just grow...there's no end."* For Wood, family was something that was large, complex, colourful, and organic. This was an addition to his smaller drawing of his family next to the tree, but when describing his drawing he indicated that the tree was the best fit for a drawing of his family rather than the human figures. He views family as something that comes naturally, continues growing, and supports and nurtures each other with growth.

When drawing the concept map for Wood's stories, I continued with the tree metaphor to help understand his concept of relationship. Throughout our time together, he used stories and examples- leaves and branches- to help illustrate the central idea for his stories, that of relationships being marked with growth, experience, and maturity.

Healthy relationships are part of maturity. Wood's family stories related to sexual health and relationships grew around ideas that relationships indicate a maturing. *"I guess when they get into the relationship thing they just kind of distance themselves a little more...they want to be independent... like my sister when she took off, that's pretty much like the gain of independence, from my mom."* He goes on to describe that maturing does not

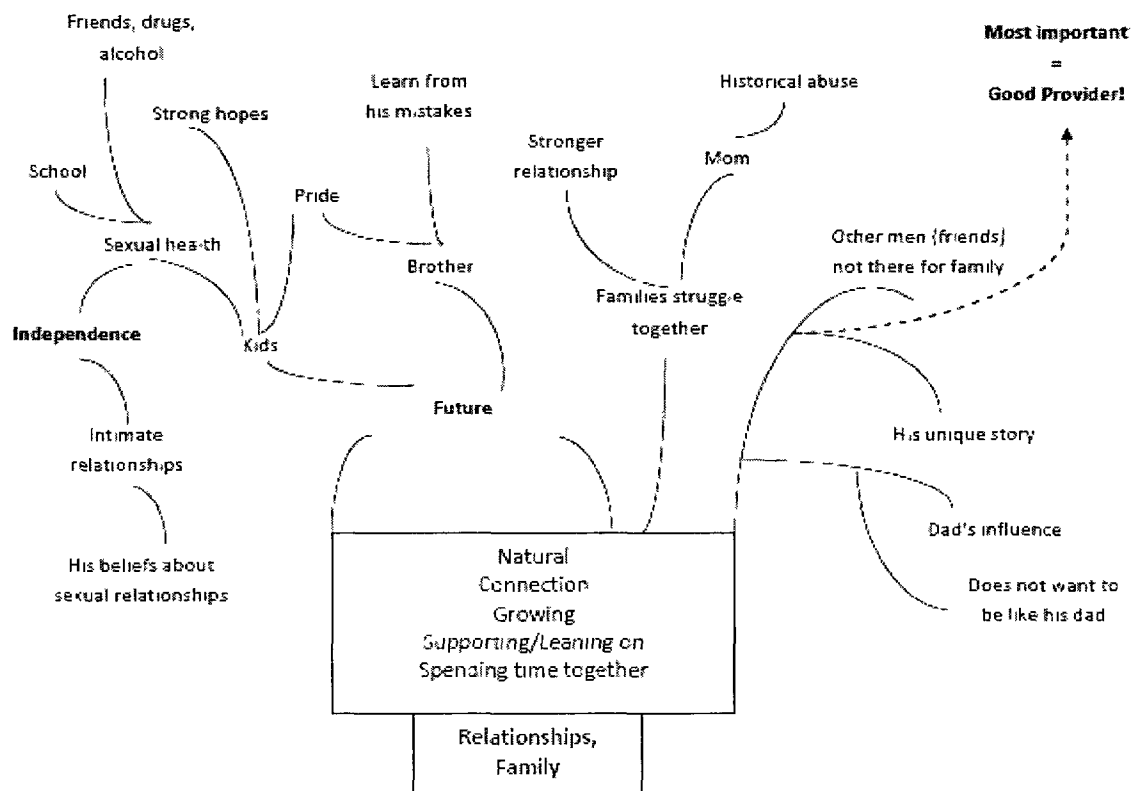
simply indicate being in a relationship, but also the expectations attached to a healthy relationship. *“The gain of independence... being needed I guess, like a sense of providing. Just trying to make things better, basically, like what I’m trying to do, just trying to make everything for the better.”* A healthy sexual relationship for him does not simply include the physiological elements of sexual attraction, but also a sense of connection to the importance of being a provider of good things for his partner.

Wood goes on to describe his understanding of this maturing in relationships by discussing his historical family relationships, especially those of his childhood with his mother and brother. As a child, he negotiated with his mother to stay healthy. *“I told her that if I finished school and graduated would she stop, you know, doing those kind of drugs, and it actually worked out like that, oddly enough...[it has been] maybe six, seven [years] since she’s done anything like that... it all worked out pretty good, staying by her and helping her work through it.”* Healthy relationships for him include working together to make things right.

Wood defines sexual health through his story with some biological risks, describing how he will need to teach his children about *“diseases out there you don’t want to catch...that really effects not only you, just your life, but your kids’ life too.”* He also associates unhealthy sexual health outcomes with other risk behaviours, such as drinking alcohol. However his story mainly focuses on a relational definition of sexual health, and that health includes a willingness to be with another person, work together, and learn together. For him, positive sexual health outcomes include closeness and support.

For Wood, making a decision to be in a healthy sexual relationship included considering his current situation, and considering the potential of being somewhere better in life with the support of an intimate partner. *“I just felt like I wanted to be with somebody, to have somebody around all the time...helping me deal with what was on my mind...[instead of] drinking and my friends, my friends aren’t the greatest of the crowd.”* He goes on to say, *“it’s just a gain of responsibility, really...what to feel about family and what to wish about family...sometimes you just have to do for the better.”*

Illustration 10: Wood's Concept Map



Vita's Analysis

"We're all pretty webbed. We've got a big web."

Vita's drawing and concept map. Vita was clear throughout the process of participating that she enjoyed story-telling, and she enjoyed drawing. Interestingly, she was the only participant to begin her drawing with the youngest member of the family, however it is also notable that her family and extended family were present in the home during our time together, and this could be a reason that she started in this fashion. Vita talked through her drawing, describing the physical characteristics of family members and some of the things that they like and disliked. She also noted that she placed her eldest daughter in the middle of her daughter and son because she had good relationships with both of them, and was linked in a way with both of them.

Vita was the only participant to describe the ways that family pets played a role in teaching relationship in the family. She included the family pets in her drawing, and indicated what they taught about relationship to the family members. She describes having this extension to the family as *"a little overwhelming but I think it's worth it,"* an apt description for her extended family. Vita was also the only participant to add the extended family to her drawing. Although other participants mentioned that extended family members played a role in family functioning, Vita indicated, *"Grandmas are the hugest role, they're the people we turn to when we need the help, because I don't always know what to do with my children, and I don't always trust people with my children...but I can trust them completely."*

As Vita described her picture to me, she began slowly drawing a series of interconnected lines on the page, then realized that it was the web of her family, that for her

also looked like a dreamcatcher. This was an important point for her; after she heard and saw what she had described, she indicated that she “*wanted a web tattoo.*”

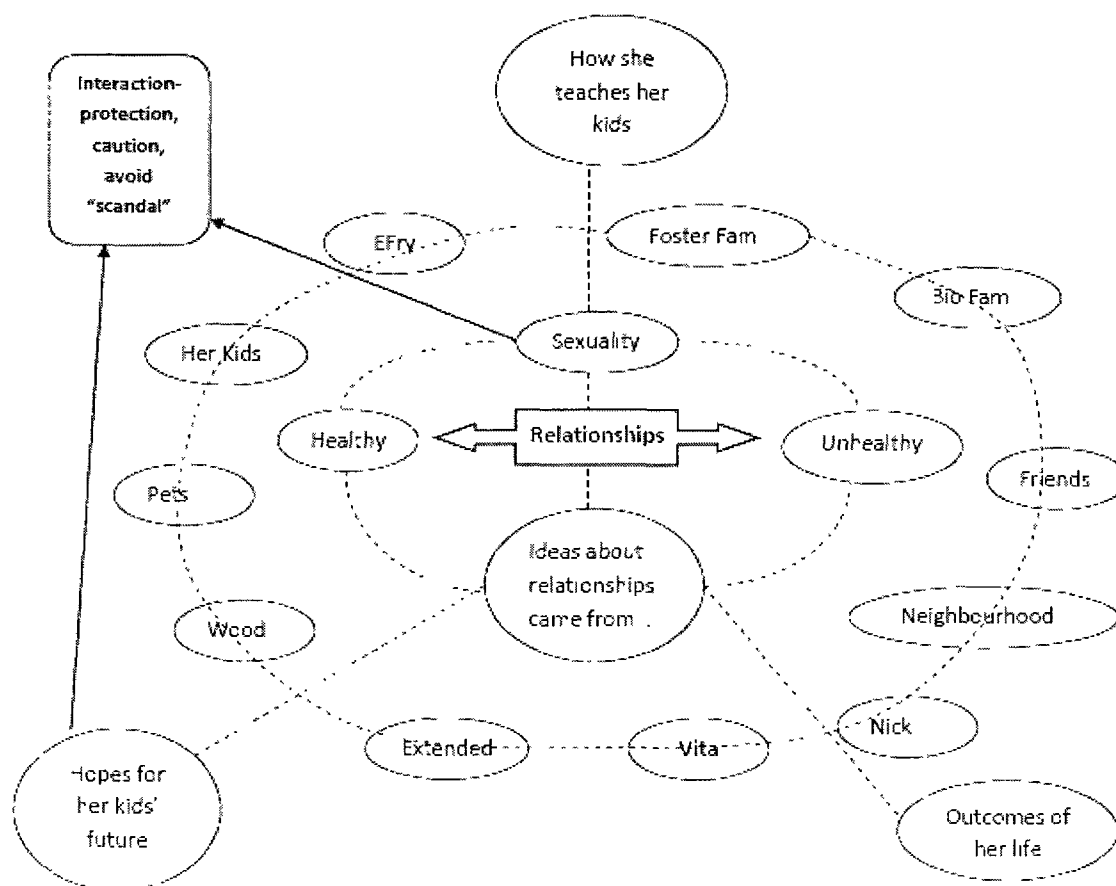
When I began outlining Vita’s concept map, I realized the importance of her web. She placed herself within a web in her stories, and her story-telling process was related to playing herself as a part of all that surrounds her. Her ideas about sexuality and health come from integrating many different inter-webbed experiences and relationships and continue to develop as her connections grow and she works to make sense of them.

Living in relationship. Vita places herself in her discussion and in her drawing within the webbed relationships that are around her. Her family stories in response to the research question connect her own stories about relationship and sexual health, and also those of the people that are connected to her. She notes through story that there are appropriate ways that relationships are *done*, first by describing her own early self. “*My first intimate relationship...that relationship was way too young to be intimate, I was 15.*” She also notes the influence of her biological family on her knowledge of appropriate ways to be in relationship, saying “*when I was living with my biological mother there was no boundaries...my biological family is very distraught, very disturbed.*” She compares this to her foster family, “*a loving, caring, secure family that taught me how to love not only myself but my siblings.*” Within the context of sexual health, she expands on the importance of healthy and secure relationships providing a foundation for positive sexual health. “*My boyfriend, he’s the spine of our family. He keeps us all together and secure and he makes sure we have food on the table, clothes on our backs.*”

Vita defines sexual health through evaluation of her experiences in relationships, using words like “*secure*,” and “*disturbed*” which have a relational element. “*I felt a lot of security...and a lot of emotional help.*” Healthy behaviours for her include those that are relationally safe, and result in respect and caring, while unhealthy behaviours are based in “*scandalous*” outcomes such as being with someone for money.

She is working on integrating her knowledge of healthy and unhealthy relationships into her role as a sexual health educator for her children. For her, this begins with teaching how people relate to one another socially in healthy ways. “*I sat down [with daughter] and said these are the things that you’re allowed to do at school, which was playing, exchanging colours, and drawing pictures. But you’re not allowed to kiss other boys or hug them or anything like that...I’ll probably teach my son how to respect a woman...which is exactly how a man would want to be respected: with love and care.*”

Illustration 11: Vita's Concept Map



Uma's Analysis

"People are like, 'You're supposed to do it like this, or you're supposed to do it like this. And I'm like, 'I don't have to do anything.'"

Uma's drawing and concept map. Important responses to the research question emerged during the process of Uma's drawing. It was not until this time that her feelings about talking about sexuality, her history of boundaries, and feelings that she had about her family surfaced. Of all the participants, my time spent with Uma was the most brief, and at the same time required the most patience and relationship development in order to develop story-lines than with the other participants. For this reason, the drawing activity became very important in illustrating not only a piece of how her family relates to one-another, but also in illuminating her thoughtfulness in connecting with the research question and openly sharing with me.

Uma drew her eldest daughter first, describing her physical characteristics. She then drew herself carrying her youngest daughter, and discussing that she feels she has to carry her all the time. Notably, Uma gave her family member's voices to indicate how she interacts with them by drawing balloons above them. She noted that her eldest daughter is interested in playing, while her youngest daughter requires attention by crying. She also indicated that her partner was only interested in sleeping. During the time that Uma and I spent together, these elements also arose in the household: her eldest daughter played with my instruments and the drawing materials, her youngest daughter was very vocal, and her partner was asleep.

The drawing process occurred at the conclusion of the interview, at which time Uma sounded apologetic and said *"I don't like people asking a bunch of weird questions...I just*

went along with it.” She went on to associate these feelings with her difficult upbringing, describing more of her childhood and family communication exchanges.

Uma’s concept map emerged into two main processes: her respect for those who raised her, and that she is now doing the best she can with a difficult situation. She places herself in the centre of her reflections on her upbringing and how that has influenced her present decisions, however she is aware that she has had to struggle through her life from childhood and now as a parent and partner.

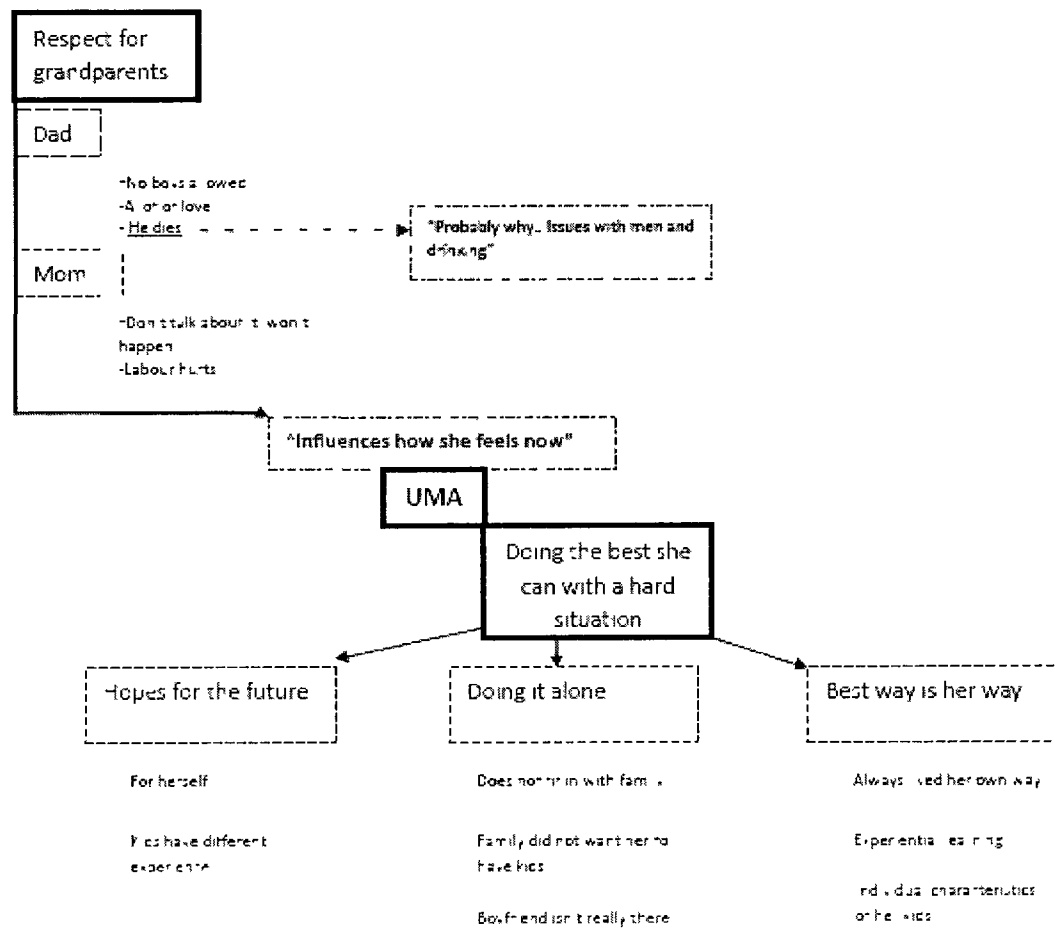
Making her own way. Uma was explicit in responding that she has never been taught how to be in a relationship, and that she is forging her way in her life without the support of others. *“Nobody ever talked about it with me. I didn’t really know...[even when I got pregnant], they were just like, it’s gonna hurt like hell.”* She expressed that she is closed about many things, and that the reason for this is that she does not like when people try to tell her the right way to live her life. *“There are people that try to tell me how to do it, but I hate it when people are like you’re supposed to do it like this and I don’t like that. People are like you’re supposed to do it like this or you’re supposed to do it like this and I’m like I don’t have to do anything... it just pisses me off when people do that. It gets under my skin and I’m like oh, why don’t you shut up. It’s not really any of your business.”*

For Uma, sexual health is defined relationally, and learns from her perceptions of how others enact sexuality. She describes that her partner tells her how other women act in relationship, adding, *“I’m not really that girl that loves to hug and cuddle.”* This definition matters for her as she works through sexual health on her own terms. She balances feeling

that she is not certain of what a definition of sexual health might be, with the sense that she can work out her understanding of the healthy and unhealthy behaviours out along the way.

She acknowledges that most of her knowledge about sexual health, both as a young person and now as a parent, comes from learning by doing. *“I did a lot of it by myself...[my daughter’s] dad was out gallivanting, having his teenage life while I’m at home with a baby...I had no support from my family. That’s hard.”* She sums up her story beautifully by adding, *“Well, it’s my choice.”*

Illustration 12: Uma's Concept Map



Chapter Six: Becoming a Better Practitioner through Participant Teachings

In earlier chapters, I discussed a broad range of programmes designed to improve sexual health education and communication in families. The participants in this study defined sexual health through unique and varied individual experiences framed within their own contexts, yet with a focus on the attainment of positive sexual health and relationship outcomes. The three over-arching themes introduced in Chapter Five- the experiential nature of relationships, hope, and the relevance of context- all point to distinctive family situations that facilitate relationship and learning. In this chapter, I will present a discussion of these themes as they are related to sexual health and family communication. I will then discuss the considerations of the themes within the fields of counselling and health promotion, and also revisit the qualitative approach and theoretical frameworks through which this work has been conducted. Finally I will present my closing comments on this thesis.

Experiential Nature of Relationships

Participants' described their communication about sexuality and relationships in a way that suggests *practice*, one that develops through time, experience, and working together in relationship, both between sexual partners and also between youth and parents. The practice and experience of being in a relationship influenced different types of family communication, including those related to sexual health and sexuality. In addition, as interactive relationships were practiced, communication content and styles evolved. Researchers highlight the importance of experiencing others through daily encounters and life experiences over time as influencing individual sexuality and identity (Diamond, 2006; Gavin et al, 2010), adding that having an awareness of the practice of relationship contributes to healthy outcomes (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010; Maloney & Altmaier, 2007). The experiences of relationship and sexuality

might be described as evolving throughout life, with ongoing possibilities, as relationships are practiced. Zabrina reflects on her present satisfaction in being part of a relationship of convenience, but in the future will be seeking a “love relationship,” recognizing that her future needs related to intimacy may change as she experiences her life. Wood reflects on the importance of growing together and working out life together, saying “*I just stuck it out with her the whole time. Stuck it out.*” Yovela asserts that, although she has not yet been able to attain the closeness that she hopes with her youngest child, she feels confident that with time she will “*get to the bottom of it,*” implying Yovela’s awareness of the ongoing practice involved in a relationship with her daughter.

The experience of relationship and how relationship is practiced has an influence on sexual health outcomes, for example through testing personal desires against the expectations of others or broadening ideas about personal agency (Beausang, 2000; Plunkett, 2001; see also Allen, Husser, Stone, & Jordal, 2008). Counsellors that have integrated experiential awareness into work with families and couples describe outcomes such as improved communication and increased empathy (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009; Gambrel & Keeling, 2010), decreased conflict (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009) and overall an increased involvement in the other’s life (Macdonald & Hastings, 2010).

Hope

Participants expressed what I would describe as feelings of hope when they discussed their abilities to communicate with their children, and the imagined futures of their children related to sexual health and relationships. Hope is defined in research as considering possibilities of future positive outcomes (Stephenson, 1991), the likelihood of improving upon current or past situations, or considering “perceived capacity to use one’s pathways to reach

desired goals” (te Riele, p. 36). Within these definitions, hope may be considered future-oriented, and throughout this project, the hoped-for future of participants and their families influenced family communication about sexuality. Examples include Xia’s communications to protect her children from sexual abuse, hoping to guard them from her painful childhood experience, and Uma’s reflections that her children are able to experience their young lives without the burden of pregnancy.

Larsen and Stege (2010) regard hope as the “unifying framework” between counsellors and clients, with other researchers agreeing that hope underlies client-counsellor interactions and goal-setting within a counselling session (Shade, 2006; te Riele, 2010). However, specific descriptions of how hope is present within counselling interventions are sometimes overlooked (see Larsen & Stege, 2010). Using the metaphor of a pathway to a goal, counsellors may work with clients to determine ways that hope can be used to develop concrete ideas for the future and avenues toward goals. In the case of family communication and sexual health decision-making, researchers suggest that counsellors can support perspective changes related to beliefs about sexual health, or highlight the resources of the client that may provide a vehicle to the client moving toward the imagined, hopeful future (Larsen, Edey, & Lemay, 2007; Larsen & Stege, 2010; Shade, 2006).

Relevance of Context

Participants presented diverse histories, imagined futures, and examples of acts of parenting in ways showing the influence of context in all discussions, including those related to sexual health. Within this theme of context, notable were the participants’ discussion of the unique characteristics of different family members and how this influenced communication. Uma describes different parenting styles for her two children, describing that her elder

daughter is playful while her younger daughter is affectionate. Wood adds that he will likely discuss sexuality differently with his daughters than with his son because young men and young women are different in ways that he cannot clearly describe, yet are important to note when connecting with his children about sexual health. *“Not they’re completely freakishly different, it’s just that the way their mind works I guess is just different.”* Xia discusses that her elder daughter is managing a developmental disability, which influences her socially. She calls this a *“no fear”* characteristic, and recalls that her discussions with her elder daughter have been focused on protecting her from risk due to her socially outgoing behaviour resulting from her disability. She compares this to differences in her perception of risk to her younger daughter, who she describes as more reserved, *“she’ll sit back and she’ll watch and she’ll study people before she’ll engage.”* Yovela also parents a daughter who she describes as *“not your typical 13-year old due to her learning disability, her mind is a lot more immature.”* Yovela senses that her younger daughter is not likely to become engaged in sexual behaviour due to her learning disability and so does not discuss sexuality with her in the same ways that she has with her other children.

These participants describe what researchers term *interrelating*, “relating towards a specified other and each person’s view of the other’s relating towards him or her” (Kalaitzaki, Birtchnell, & Nestoros, 2010, p. 463; see also Donley & Likins, 2010). Interrelating describes the complex, multi-directional landscape of relationships within which family dialogue takes place. Research indicates that youth look to both their siblings and to their parents to develop ideas about communication, health, and sexuality, pointing to the relevance of interrelating when exploring sexual health communication in families. Interrelating between parents and siblings influences physical activity and nutrition (Roemmich, White, Paluch, & Epstein,

2010), substance misuse (Gossrau-Breen, Kuntsche, & Gmel, 2010), and increasing positive communication interactions (Kalaitzaki, Birtchnell, & Nestoros, 2010). Family interrelating also influences the actions related to parenting, such as reacting to risks of children (Deater-Deckard, Sewell, Petrill, & Thompson, 2010; Morrongiello, Schmidt, & Schell, 2010) and actions that may be associated with being a sibling, such as sharing interests, supervising one-another, or simply playing together (Morrongiello et al, 2010; Voorpostel, Lippe, & Dykstra, 2007). Although these researchers investigate the influence of interrelatedness on a number of outcomes, there is little research on interrelating with parents and siblings and outcomes specific to sexual health.

The presence of a child in the family managing a disability is notable, with the experiences described by both Xia and Yovela being related to protection from risk and reluctance to discussing sexuality. Research suggests that this stance is taken by other parents of youth managing developmental disabilities (see Evans et al, 2009; Macpherson et al, 2008). There is a need for investigation of this area, as some researchers indicate that youth and young adults managing developmental or learning disabilities may lack knowledge about sexuality or sexual health (Isler, Tas, Beytut, & Conk, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Servais, 2006), yet the opportunities for positive and negative sexual health outcomes are still a reality.

Participants also reflected on what Goodall (2005) calls the *narrative inheritance* (p. 492), tales of upbringing, family and history that are intended to both describe and defend family culture and decision-making. This included participant reflections on unanswered questions related to their own parenting, such as Zabrina pondering why her mother had not been more honest with her when she was younger, or Xia questioning how her mother was not more aware of her abuse experiences. Vita and Wood both defend actions taken by their

parents that they might not have agreed with, with Vita describing that her “*biological family is very distraught, disturbed family*” and Wood saying that his mother was “*going through so much stuff.*” These participants explore reasons behind different actions taken by their parents that might have influenced their communication. The narrative inheritance shared by participants provides clues of their perceptions of ways their upbringing preparing them to explore sexuality communication as parents. The preparedness in cases such as Zabrina and Xia included parenting differently from parents, reacting to their unanswered questions. For Vita and Wood, they appeared to both respect the difficult experiences within which their parents raised them, while working hard to ensure that their own children were not exposed to similar incidents.

Contextual knowledge, here described by participants relating to families and sexual health, is rooted in cultural and social norms and values, and constantly evolving. Exploring contextual situations to reflect upon sexual health and family communication may expand awareness of relationships and family dynamics, and encourage the story-teller to reflect on how context may influence outcomes (Baker Miller et al., 2004; Duran, 2006; Duran & Duran, 1995; Herman, 1992; Holleran & Waller, 2003; Short, Grant, & Clarke, 2007; Skerrett, 2004; Walker, 2004). The relevance of context plays a role in the family stories and sexual health education in the stories of the participants, influencing how their values and situations can offer pathways to preferred outcomes.

A Qualitative Approach to Sexual Health

White (2007) says that narratives “assist us in finding our way to destinations that could not have been specified ahead of the journey, via routes that could not have been predetermined (p. 5), beautifully representing the outcomes of this qualitative approach to

sexual health. The results of this journey have included diverse responses, uncovering the layers of life relevant in building sexual health knowledge in families. There were times within this process when I wondered if I should attempt to ‘focus’ participant responses specific to sexuality, however Bishop (1994) reminds us that participants become a part of the goal-setting when they develop rich, contextual responses. In this work, it was my responsibility as the researcher to reflect on my own biases and expectations of responses and value the truths upon which the participants built their sexual health knowledge.

I continue to believe that working with narrative to explore sexual health and family communication presents a good fit. I was particularly delighted with the drawing activity, both as a tool for exploring participants’ experiences and also because of the element of fun that drawing brought into the discussion. Duran (2006) suggests that bringing elements of creativity into practical settings are “liberation interventions,” presenting a truly client-centred approach to the work where the client “can realize fairly quickly that the intervention resides in her” (p. 41; see also Barton, 2004). I felt that during the art piece the participants opened up a bit, enjoying the experience of drawing and exploring their illustrated relationship, and also adding an element of fun to what may have been experienced as an intense interview.

I believe that this work contributes to a body of knowledge about sexual health and family communication, especially how it relates to the fields of both counselling and health promotion. The stories and drawings presented here offer insights into the diverse pathways to sexual health and family communication and, although some parallels exist in the participant stories, no responses were the same. This research supports health promotion programs that are situated toward the needs of individuals and community, and return to the purpose of health services, that is to support the healing journey of the client, based on the

values and goals of the client (Bleakly, 2005; Eby & Galbreath, 2010; Riley, 2005). This work promotes actions and activities that I can take as a counsellor and health educator to address determinants of health and work toward improving some of the health outcomes that I have presented in the preceding paragraphs.

Implications of *Beforeplay*

In this research I aimed to explore how discussions of sexuality and relationship health are negotiated within the daily lives of youth and parents. Participants provided landscapes upon which sexual health is explored in the family setting, and diverse sources of information for how sexuality is to be communicated in the home. This included the influence of daily social realities, evolving beliefs, feelings, and family roles which result in a complex parent-child relationship that informs family communication. This research adds to a body of research knowledge that highlights the utility of a narrative inquiry to explore complex themes layered in social values and norms, such as family and sexuality (see Barton, 2004; Freeman, 1999; Guenette & Marshall, 2009; Milnes, 2010; Penn & Frankfurth, 1994).

This research may also inform counsellors and sexual health educators hoping to expand their knowledge in working with clients. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of learning in and from relationships, hope as a factor in decision-making, and the unique contexts of their family situations. These were key ideas presented in relation to how their family relationships influenced sexuality communication. Researchers advocate for a client-counsellor setting that supports the exploration of experiential nature of relationships (Hill, 2009; Maree & Pollard, 2009; Mollen & Staub, 2010; Neimeyer, 2006), including a strengths-based approach to goal-setting that frames the client in their own unique context

(McInerney, 2007; Shade, 2006; te Riele, 2010). The stories presented here support the recommendations of these researchers working within a client-centered framework.

Further implications of this work are relevant to the topic of sexual health education. This research highlights that participants define sexual health through their own lived experiences, although research discussed in detail in Chapter Two notes that sexual health education is generally part of targeted programs. Participant stories here suggest that an enhanced program of sexual health education would include a combination of content that is sexuality-specific with elements including the relevance of family relationships, self-reflection, and opportunities for evaluation of the past, present, and hoped-for future. A sexual health education program could include reflection on the position of the learner and the educator in order to clarify a person's unique context, including characteristics of family members and the influence of elders. Constructing an imagined healthy future or pathways to goals offer incorporation of hope for the learner, as suggested by this research. Finally, presenting sexual health in a dynamic way, that takes into account the ongoing learning and experiential nature of the sexual self, supports the development of sexual health education that includes elements of ongoing reflection.

Limitations and Opportunities

Qualitative research is notably non-generalizable, therefore this research does not resolve some of the dilemmas within sexual health communication for many families living in the Central Interior of British Columbia. Narrative research focuses on subjective truths, rather than empirically-based evidence (Creswell, 1998; Trochim, 2006; Winter, 2000). This may be particularly notable in research exploring sexual health promotion, as funding for this type of education is typically based in empirical supported, quantitative methods.

Limitations specific to this research project surround the subject matters of sexuality and family communication. First, there are likely very relevant differences in individuals who are willing to participate in a study where they will be asked to story their sexuality education within their family life (Lewis, 2009; Lynch, Stern, Oates, & O'Toole, 2006). Second, there are limitations to the relevance of this type of research from the perspective of a counselling practitioner. There are researchers that caution about topics that may be unapproachable by some counsellors, especially those related to values and culture (Gammeltoft, 2002; Milnes, 2010; Wear, 2005). Sexual health, family roles, gender, and social institutions are topics that emerged within this research. Although I have considered where these topics are relevant within counselling and health education practices, these may be areas practitioners do not desire to explore with clients, therefore this research may not support the learning of those practitioners.

An important limitation that I experienced in conducting this research was that of the lack of response to my request for participant feedback. There are researchers that explore the usefulness of the “disinterested” participant, suggesting that when a participant feels confident in the outcomes during the interview, they are more likely to decline commenting on the final product due to their feelings of trust and connection during the storying process (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Nutt Williams, & Hess, 2005, p. 15). However, I still felt a measure of disappointment with this situation. Rather than consider the lack of participant feedback as a limitation in this research, this limitation presents opportunities for future development and research using qualitative methods, exploring sexual health and families and finding ways to increase feedback after the initial interview is completed.

The case for participatory research. The research question presented here to six participants did not precisely identify short-comings in sexual health education in the Central Interior that would result in the statistics indicating the over-abundance of negative sexual health outcomes presented in Chapter One. Rather, this research opened the door of limitless possibilities of connections between life and sexual health. This research might offer a foundation for future community based and locally relevant endeavours focusing on individual, family, and community development that could result in an increase of positive sexual health outcomes. I suggest that participatory research may be one pathway to improving community health in the Central Interior. Participatory research methods realize the strengths of community members by allowing participants to identify their own values and goals. This type of research suggests that evaluation of community health concerns increases awareness, as participants alternately reflect on shortcomings in sexual health education and work toward problem definition and goal implementation. Specifically, allowing participants to reflect on their community, individual and collective health, and the nature of development through a participatory project are all useful in honouring individual experiences, while engaging critical voices in community health issues (Cahill, 2007; Driskell, 2002; Israel, Schultz, Parker, Becker, Allen, & Guzman, 2003).

I suggest that a participatory project in the Central Interior that brings both youth and adult community members together to share stories such as the ones in this project may facilitate an exploration of relationships, improved access to sexual health education programs for participants and expanded possibilities for social change. A participatory program would also benefit researchers and health promotion experts in better identifying accurate research questions to explore sexual health education shortcomings. The unique focus of individual

story-telling, as presented here, offers the participants space to reflect on their own standpoints, identifying personal definitions of sexual health and healthy outcomes (Frank, 2000). A participatory program might reveal research questions around ways that actions and knowledge related to sexual health may be contradictory, including specific sexual health education embedded in the process (Driskell, 2002; Wood, 2009). A participatory research program with the outcomes of this narrative process in mind has the potential of engaging participants in deciding how their experiential lives, hope, and individual and unique contexts provide a setting for healthy outcomes for sexuality and relationships.

Personal Learning and Final Comments

I chose to participate in this narrative research framed in critical theory and social constructionism because I am committed to respecting relationships, acknowledging the importance of historical processes in health outcomes, and working toward social empowerment that includes active agency in health and education programming (Duran, 2006; Herman, 1992; Skerrett, 2004; Walker, 2004). The participants and the process of this research have taught me new ways to grow in relationship with others, and help me reflect on how to be a better counsellor. This was highlighted within my reflections on participant non-feedback, when I considered how the participants already lived their stories, and that the stories were only new for me. This development of critical awareness is not in my participants, but rather in me. These stories continue to support my development as a counsellor, and may support new developments in community-centred work for others. I have found the shared experience of storying and drawing with participants to be delightful. All participants shared their unique perspectives, their trials and struggles at trying to be the very best parent that they possibly could imagine, and their unending hope and love for their

children today and far into the future. I asked for stories on the specific- though complex- topic of sexuality. What I heard and what I was taught was that sexuality is a single page embedded in a chapter, a volume, a library of works that make up a person's life.

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Appendix A: Recruitment

Female and male parents of youth aged 12 to 19 wanted to participate in a 1-2 hour interview for research for UNBC graduate student. The purpose of the research is to better understand how families discuss sexual health. \$30 cash honorarium. 555-5555 or study@gmail.com

Female and male parents aged 19 or 20 wanted to participate in a 1-2 hour interview for research for UNBC graduate student. The purpose of the research is to better understand how families discuss sexual health. \$30 cash honorarium. 555-5555 or study@gmail.com

Appendix B: Eligibility Script

Hello _____

Thank you for your interest in my study. I am going to briefly explain the purpose of the study and then review the criteria to ensure that you are eligible to participate.

[Study Purpose]

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of families discussing sexual health (that is, behaviour and protection such as birth control). I am interested in hearing about your perspectives and experiences talking with your parent/caregiver [or] child/children about sexual health. I am conducting this study in Prince George. The purpose of the interview is to give you an opportunity to discuss your experiences about the ways your family talks with each other about sexual health and how this may influence your behaviour. I am interested to hear your story of what it is like to be in your family, how your family communicates/will communicate about sexual health, and if you believe that this has had an impact on your decision-making.

This work will be used for the completion of my studies in my MEd. in the Counselling program at the University of Northern BC.

I feel that it is important to hear your story about how family communication (that is, conversations, discussions, and actions) has impacted your decisions about sexual health. I hope that this research improves how counsellors work with families about sexual health needs, and helps service providers to better understand the needs of our community in relation to sexual health.

If you agree to be part of this research, you would be required to participate in a 1-2 hour audio-taped interview, during which I will ask you to reflect on your experiences discussing sexual health in your family.

I am offering a \$30.00 honorarium to participants who take part in the 1 to 2 hour interview.

[Youth]

1. Are you between the ages of 19 and 20?

2. Have you or your partner experienced pregnancy while you were between the ages of 13 and 19?

[Parent]

1. Are you parenting someone between the ages of 13 and 19?

[In case of eligibility]

I would like to tell you a bit more about how the interview will be conducted.

If you wish, I can email or mail a blank copy of the informed consent form to you before your scheduled interview so you have a chance to read it. Would you like me to send you a copy of the blank informed consent form to read through before we meet?

You will have the chance to read through the informed consent form and ask me any questions about the study. You will not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you can end the interview at any time.

[About the Interview Process]

If you are eligible and decide to participate in an interview, I will ask you to reflect on your family (that is, what it was like growing up in your household/what it is like for you to be a parent) and what it is like to learn about sexual health in your family.

The interview will take 1 – 2 hours and you will receive \$30 for completing it.

Do you have any questions about what I have said?

Where can I send a copy of the consent form?

Appendix C: Research Probes

I would like you to tell me a story of how you learned about sexuality in your family. I have no set questions to ask. I am just interested in hearing about how you learned about sexuality in your family as if it were a story with a beginning, a middle, and how things will look in the future.

Some people have a storyline that includes the first time that sexuality was mentioned, how new discussions and influences were added to family discussions, and how family members responded to relationships that you may have had. Sometimes it helps to get started by thinking about what life was like before you talked about sexuality in your family.

Possible Additional Probes

How did the topic of sexuality come up? How did you know that this was the time to bring this up?

Do you recall any questions that came up for you? For members of your family?

When you think about your experience, do you think it is similar or different to the experiences of other families? Do you have ideas as to how it is different?

Do you hope to be the same type of parent as your own parents? How or where do you think you learned about how to be a parent?

How did you learn that these are the things that should be discussed about sexuality?

Siblings or other family members involved? What about family friends?

Appendix D- Research Participant Information Letter

Principal Investigator:

Autumn Marie Chilcote, BA

MEd Candidate- Counselling, University of Northern British Columbia

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Linda O'Neill, University of Northern BC (Supervisor)

Dr. John Sherry, University of Northern BC

Dr. Catherine Etmanski, University of Victoria

Beforeplay: Family stories and sexual decision-making

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Autumn Chilcote, an MEd graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). This study is being completed as a partial requirement for fulfillment of an MEd degree in Counselling in the Education Department at UNBC.

Purpose and goals of the research. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of families discussing sexual health (that is, sexual behaviour and protection such as birth control), and how experiences of family discussion influence decisions about sexual behaviour. This research is designed to improve how counsellors work with families about issues related to sexual health, and to help service providers better understand the needs of the community in relation to sexual health.

You have been asked to participate in this study because:

- You are currently a resident of Prince George, British Columbia
- You are parenting a youth between the ages of 13 and 19 or you are a parent that is between the ages of 19 and 20.
- You are willing to participate in this study's research process

What is involved.

- A private one-on-one interview that will last between 1-2 hours in which you will reflect on your experiences in your family talking about sexual health. You will be asked to relate your experiences talking with child/children about sexual health. You will be asked to relate your story of what it is like to be in your family and how your family communicates/will communicate about sexual health. This interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to participate in a 10-minute drawing activity. All materials will be provided for you.

- After the interviews have been analyzed, you will be asked to help check the results. You may also be asked additional questions regarding family discussion and communication related to sexual health. This will involve a short interview lasting about 30 minutes. You will have the opportunity to add ideas and let the researcher know if the results make sense to you. This interview will be audio-recorded.

Protection of your identity and how information is kept private. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only as required by law. If you give us your permission by signing this document, the responses that you provide will be used to write about and present on this topic. All identifying information will be removed or censored to protect your privacy. To further protect your privacy, you will be asked to select a false name, which will be used to identify your responses on all future documents. The information that you provide for this study will be kept in locked storage until the study is completed (December 2010), after which time it will be destroyed. **This interview will be audio-recorded.** The audio recording will be transcribed (typed), with any identifying information being censored in order to protect your privacy and the privacy of your family. The audio recording will be kept in locked storage at UNBC until the completion of the project, after which time it will be destroyed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or after the interview.

Potential benefits of the study and Compensation. You will receive a \$30 cash honorarium for participating in this study. Additional benefits might include self-awareness and the opportunity to tell one's story. We cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive additional benefits from this study.

Potential risks of the study. You are being asked to reflect on family relationships and sexual health, and may feel some discomfort in discussing these sensitive topics. You may withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or after the interview and you can refuse to answer any questions. If you choose to withdraw from the study during the interview, the audio recordings and any information you provided will be destroyed. In addition, you will be provided with community resources where counselling and health services are available to you.

For more information. If you have any questions or comments about the study, you may ask at any time before, during, or after the interview. You may also contact Autumn Chilcote at chilcote@unbc.ca. Any concerns or complaints about the project can be directed to the Office of Research, reb@unbc.ca or 250-960-5650.

For a copy of the research results please include your email or mailing address in the space indicated below, or contact Autumn Chilcote at chilcote@unbc.ca.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Appendix E: Research Consent Form

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you read and received a copy of the participant information letter?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research study at any time?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand the benefits and risks of participating in this research study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand that the interviews will be audio recorded?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you know what community resources are available for additional support?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

This study was explained to me by:

Printed name of Research Participant:

I agree to participate in this research study:

Date

Signature of Research Participant

I would like a copy of the research results, please send them to:

Email

(or)

Mailing address

Appendix F: Meta-theme Concept Map

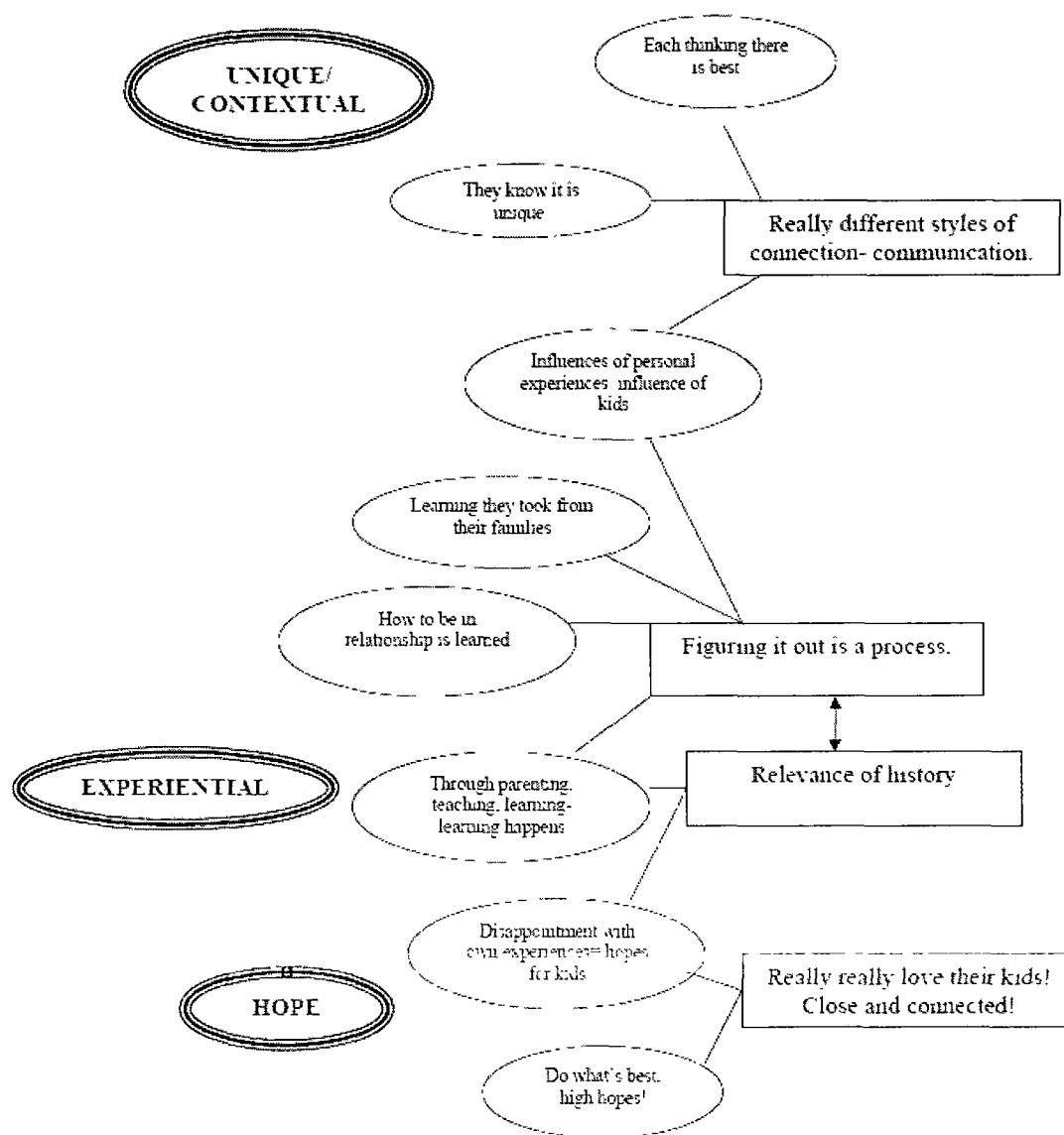


Table 1

Provincial and Regional Statistics on Pregnancy and STIs for Central Interior and British Columbia

	Province	Central Interior Region
Pregnancy	10.73 per 1000	19.73 per 1000
HIV	9 per 100,000	16 per 100,000
Chlamydia	228 per 100,000	409 per 100,000
Hepatitis C	66 per 100,000	68 per 100,000
Infectious Syphilis	5 per 100,000	6 per 100,000

(BC Vital Statistics, 2006; BCCDC, 2007)

¹ "Will & Grace" is an America sitcom that centers around the relationship between a gay man and his heterosexual female roommate. (IMDb.com (1998). *Will & Grace*. Retrieved August 22, 2010 from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0157246/>)

² Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.